THERE IS NO ANTI MEMETICS DIVISION

BY qntm

'Astonishing'
M. R. Carey

About the Author

qntm is the internet handle of Sam Hughes, a writer and software developer living in the UK. He has been writing short-form and serial science fiction for most of this millennium; his preferred writing technique is to start from an interesting hypothetical and drive it to breaking point and far beyond. His website is qntm.org.

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FOR NICOLA

Ref.: U-0055 • **Cat.:** ε_0/—

Containment protocol: U-0055 is kept in building 67, vault 3011A at the UO Primary Archive Facility at Black River. This containment unit is a 5.00 × 5.00 × 2.50m cuboidal room clad in layers of cement and electromagnetic interference shielding. Security personnel are *not* to be posted outside U-0055's containment unit.

Description: U-0055 is a 'self-keeping secret' or 'antimeme.' Information about U-0055's physical appearance as well as its nature, behaviour and origins is self-classifying. To clarify:

- How the Organisation originally acquired U-0055 is unknown.
- U-0055's physical appearance is unknown. It is not indescribable, nor invisible; individuals are perfectly capable of entering U-0055's containment unit and observing it, taking mental or written notes, making sketches, taking photographs and even making audio/video recordings. An extensive log of such observations is on file. However, information about U-0055's physical appearance 'leaks' out of a human mind soon after such an observation. Individuals tasked with describing U-0055 afterward find their minds wandering and lose interest in the task; individuals tasked with sketching a copy of a photograph of U-0055 are unable to remember what the photograph looks like, as are researchers overseeing these tests. Security personnel who have observed U-0055 via closed-circuit television cameras emerge after a full shift exhausted and effectively amnesiac about the events of the previous hours.
- Who authorised the construction of U-0055's containment unit, why it was constructed in this way, and what the purpose of the described containment protocol may be are all unknown.
- Despite U-0055's containment unit being easily accessible, personnel at Black River uniformly claim no knowledge of U-0055's existence when challenged.

- [redacted] U-0055.

All of these facts are periodically rediscovered, usually by chance readers of this file, causing considerable alarm. This state of concern lasts minutes at most, before the matter is simply forgotten about.

A great deal of scientific data has been recorded from U-0055, but cannot be studied. U-0055 may present a major physical threat and indeed may have killed hundreds of personnel, and we would not know it. Certainly, it presents a major memetic/mental threat, hence its (tentative) ε categorisation.

At least two attempts have been made to destroy U-0055, or possibly to move it from containment at Black River to another UO Archive Facility, meeting failure for reasons unknown.

Addendum, 2008-11-10: It is hypothesised that U-0055 was never formally acquired by the Organisation and is in fact an autonomous or remotely controlled agent, inserted at Black River by an unidentified third party for the purpose of silently observing or interfering with other Unknowns, the Organisation itself, or [redacted].

No action to counter this potential threat is suggested, or indeed theoretically possible.

I

UNKNOWNS

1

Induction

‘Do anything nice over Christmas?’

This time the assistant doesn’t answer at all. She just stops typing, dead in the middle of a word, and stares at Quinn.

Quinn says, ‘Did I ask you that already?’

‘Twice,’ the woman says. Exasperation and puzzlement. ‘We already had that whole conversation. And we also already had the conversation where I told you you already asked me that and you apologised.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Quinn says.

‘Yeah. That.’

‘You think I have memory issues,’ Quinn says. ‘You think I’ve got no long-term memory, and if I stay in one place for too long I forget why I’m there.’

The assistant, Rowland, says, cautiously, ‘I attributed it to stress.’

Quinn smiles sympathetically and shakes her head. ‘It’s not stress. Do you think Mr Mahlo’s going to be much longer?’

The assistant has turned back to her computer. ‘This is the C-level. Meetings at this level take as long as they need to take, and you wait. Mr Mahlo will see you when he’s ready.’ She says this many times a day.

Quinn turns back to the window. The building is Georgian, with high ceilings, and the window is correspondingly tall, a rectangle of white. It is a stunning January day out there, brisk but clear and bright. Four floors below, the streets are rammed with traffic, like always. Beyond that, the river is busy too. Quinn watches a ferry.

She turns fifty this year. She is diminutive and flint-eyed, very dark-haired but rapidly greying. Today, her hair is strictly pulled back and up into a silver clasp. She wore her good suit for this, one button, very dark grey, with a solid blue blouse underneath. Ankle boots with stout heels, two silver

stud earrings in each lobe. Contact lenses, not the usual glasses. On a lanyard around her neck she wears a security pass with a bright orange and red diagonal stripe.

She toys nervously with her lighter. She wastes a little of the flame. She is here to meet Mahlo, and the C-level is scary. Cs never want to see you for a small thing. It's the end of the world, or nothing.

Something in her bag chimes. It's time for a pill. She fishes her phone out and tells it to remind her later.

The door to the inner office opens. Five people emerge, Organisation executives and a few EAs, with briefcases and laptops. As a group, they head straight past the assistant's desk and Quinn toward the lifts. Their security escort, a featureless man who has been waiting silently in the far corner of the reception area since before Quinn arrived, detaches from the wall and accompanies them.

Quinn recognises only one of the faces – Reinhardt, director of the Organisation in Germany. The Organisation hierarchy is an international sprawl, occluded and continually shifting, but she is a peer of Mahlo's. Quinn doesn't know the others. In any case, none of them glance in her direction.

And five more excruciating minutes pass.

'No,' Quinn mutters under her breath. 'Sit still.' The assistant doesn't notice this.

Finally, Mahlo's door opens again. A different man pokes his head around the door. He's twenty-something, improbably youthful, like a teenager stuffed into one of his dad's business shirts. His haircut is barely regulation. In one hand he holds a tablet computer showing his boss's day planner. It's packed. The man evidently does not sleep.

'Marie? We're ready for you now.'

■

The office door closes behind them with a heavy mechanical *clunk,* as if the thing is part of a machine built into the office walls. While Quinn takes the indicated chair, the young man turns and does some confusing additional things to the door, causing it to make several further strange noises. Mahlo and the rest of his tier have non-trivial privacy and security requirements.

The office is spacious, but contrives to be dark despite two big corners of window and broad daylight outside. The walls are all bookshelves and dark wood panelling; perfectly stylish, but a style from the nineties, a little worn, and not yet old enough to have become fashionable again.

As for the fellow behind the desk: Mahlo is a relatively small, unassuming, sullen-faced man whose age is curiously difficult to place. Depending on how the light in the room catches his face, he looks twenty-nine or fifty-eight, and when he moves, reaching for a glass of water or a pen, he does so with the fragile care of a centenarian. The stripe on his pass is black.

Quinn forces herself to set her bag beside her chair, not clutch it defensively in her lap. She takes a deep breath. 'So. What's our topic? All I got was the meeting invitation, no agenda or subject. I mean, the UKI director says "jump," you jump, but –'

Looking to her right, she notices that the young man, without saying anything or making any undue sound, has set his tablet down on a table, produced a gun, and aimed it at her head. Quinn stops talking. She sits still in her chair for a little while, absorbing the change of pace. Her heart rate rises to a hummingbird's.

'Okay?' she hazards. She licks her lips and grips the armrests, otherwise staying perfectly still, waiting for another prompt. The young man's face is totally neutral now, like this is just how meetings go.

Mahlo asks her, 'Who do you work for?'

Quinn blinks. 'What? Oh, God.'

He checks his notes. He speaks with a slow, almost soporific rhythm. 'Marie Quinn, forty-nine. Married, no children. Avid hiker, adept climber, enjoys knitting and birdwatching. Sound education, airtight financials, a perfectly consistent background as far back as we can examine. And you've got full Organisation credentials that we've never issued, including access to a list of installations and rooms that … Well. Some of these locations don't exist, or were torn down decades ago. At least one hasn't been built yet, yet you've got the front door key to it. That's before we get to your level of access to the Unknowns themselves, which I can only term as "egregious."

'So you're a spy, and your objectives are misaligned with ours, and young Mr Levene's recommendation was to transfer you to Processing and let them unwind you, but I was able to bring him around. I talked him into a

face-to-face. I thought there was a slim chance that if we locked you in a shielded room and asked politely, you'd have the good sense to spare yourself the rest.'

Quinn takes a shallow breath. She glances sideways at the gun. Levene hasn't moved. 'Mr Mahlo, you know me. We've met several times. I'm your chief of Antimemetics.'

'We don't have an Antimemetics Division,' Levene says.

'… Mr Levene is mistaken,' Quinn says, to Mahlo. 'The Organisation has a research division for every class of Unknown and more. Telepathics, Inanimates, Cryptozoology. My division doesn't always show up in the listing. It's not something we can help. It's the nature of the work we do.'

She hesitates. Silence from the other two. But she hasn't been told to stop. Another glance at the gun.

She needs a raise.

'There's the easy stuff,' she says. 'There are Unknowns that are basic monsters. There are impossible books and haunted Siberian research labs and psychic teenagers and mythological swords that make you crazy. After that, things start to become interesting. There are Unknowns with dangerous memetic properties. There are contagious *ideas,* which require containment just like any physical threat. Viral concepts. They get inside your head, and ride your mind to reach other minds. And so, we have a Memetics Division. Right?'

'Right,' Mahlo says. He could name a score of Unknowns fitting this description without thinking.

'There are Unknowns with antimemetic properties,' Quinn goes on. 'There are ideas that cannot be spread. There are entities and phenomena that harvest and consume information, particularly information about themselves. You take a Polaroid photo of one, it'll never develop. You write a description down with a pen on paper and hand it to someone, but what you've written turns out to be hieroglyphs, and nobody can understand them, not even you. You can look directly at one and it won't even be invisible, but you'll still perceive nothing there. Dreams you can't hold on to and secrets you can never share, and lies, and living conspiracies. It's a conceptual ecosystem, of ideas consuming other ideas and … sometimes … segments of reality. Sometimes, people.

'Which makes them a threat. That's all there is to it. Antimemetic entities are dangerous and they are beyond our understanding; therefore, they fall

within the Organisation's remit. Hence, my division. This is our specialty. We can do the sideways thinking that's necessary to combat something that can literally eat your combat training.

'Mr Mahlo: You already know all of this. Dig deep.'

'This is a cover story,' Levene says to Mahlo, not taking his eyes off Quinn. 'It's a good one, but she's had it worked out in advance.'

'Levene, put it away,' Mahlo says.

Grudgingly, Levene does so. He backs up and leans against a bookcase, unconvinced.

Quinn breathes out.

'Name one,' Mahlo says. 'Name an antimemetic Unknown.'

'U-0055,' Quinn says.

'There is *no* U-0055,' Levene snaps.

Quinn winces. 'There is. Check the database.'

'The reference numbers are assigned randomly,' Levene says. Quinn opens her mouth to offer a small correction, but Levene doesn't notice, and presses on. 'There are gaps. That number hasn't been assigned. It's not superstition, we have enough to be concerned about without arbitrary numerological mysticism. We have U-0666 and U-0013. But there's no U-0001. And there's no U-0055.'

'Levene,' Mahlo says, 'you should look at this.' He turns his monitor so Levene can see the file he's just retrieved. Levene circles around to behind Mahlo's desk, and takes a look. He reads the file, from top to bottom. Stunned, he scrolls back and reads it all a second time.

'You've seen this before?' he asks Mahlo.

'Never,' Mahlo admits. He leans back in his chair, clasping his hands together. 'As far as I can remember, anyway. If the content is accurate, we've both seen it dozens of times.'

Levene says, 'It's a con.'

'Original file creation date is July 2005,' Mahlo says. 'It's got all the right cryptographic signatures. Including mine. It's real.'

'Then she put it there! We don't know how long she's been spying here. Hidden until she needed it, right now.'

'Let's say it's real,' Mahlo says.

'It isn't *possible.*'

Quinn has to stifle a snort of laughter. 'For Christ's sake, Levene. Are you new?'

Levene glares at her. He circles the desk again, and advances on her.

‘Not yet,’ Mahlo says.

Levene slows. Still eyeing Quinn with suspicion, he takes up his station with his back to the bookcase again.

‘Let’s say it’s real,’ Mahlo repeats. ‘If it’s real, then who wrote the file? And how, for that matter, do you, Ms Quinn, retain knowledge of any of this?’

‘The file was written by Dr Edward Hix,’ Quinn says. ‘He used to work in my division. He’s dead.’

‘What happened to him?’

‘You don’t want to know what happened to him.’

There is a very long pause while both Mahlo and Levene react to this. In fact, they pass through a long sequence of discrete reactions. Indignation at the seeming rudeness; confusion at Quinn’s incaution in front of sinister superiors; surprise at the magnitude of the claim; pure disbelief; comprehension; and finally, horror.

‘What …’ Mahlo asks carefully, ‘would happen if we did know what happened to him?’

‘It would happen to you as well,’ Quinn says, levelly. ‘The circumstances of Dr Hix’s death are contagious, and the investigation is closed … As for your other question: we manage that pharmaceutically. I don’t need to lecture you about the challenges of secrecy in this line of work. You know that for as long as the Organisation has existed we have routinely used amnestic medications to suppress, alter, or erase problematic memories. Well, in the Antimemetics Division, we have the opposite problem. When we need to retain things that would otherwise be impossible to retain, we use mnestic medications. That’s “mnestic” with a silent *M*. Same Greek root as the word “mnemonic.” There are four families of the drug. W, X, Y and Z. Ah …’

In her bag, her phone has chimed again.

Slowly, with a nod of approval from Mahlo, Quinn reaches into her bag and turns her phone off, acknowledging the prompt this time instead of postponing it. She pulls a blister pack from the pocket beside it, and pops a pill out. It’s hexagonal, pale green. She holds it up, between a thumb and forefinger, and is relieved to see a flicker of recognition on Mahlo’s face. He is beginning to put it back together.

Quinn says, ‘These are Class W mnestics. The weakest, suitable for continual use. You take one every twelve hours, the more consistent the timing the better. You can order them through the Pharm. The pharmacist will claim they don’t stock any such thing. They’re misremembering, tell them to double-check.’

She swallows it, dry.

Mahlo grunts. ‘And now, I think, I see. I see why we’re having this conversation at all.’

‘You missed a dose,’ Quinn says. ‘You’re supposed to be on these, the same as me and everybody on my staff. It’s the only way we can work. You forgot to take a pill, and then you forgot all the information that the pills were helping you to retain. Why you were taking them, who gave them to you, where to get more. You forgot about me, and my entire division. And now I have to bring you up to speed.’

She offers the blister pack to Mahlo.

Levene steps forward, agitated. ‘Mr Mahlo.’

Mahlo takes the pack, pops a second pill out and studies it. ‘And if I take this,’ he says, ‘I’ll retain this whole conversation and we won’t have to have it again?’

‘I hope not,’ Quinn says, meaning it.

Mahlo swallows the pill, with a gulp of water from a glass.

Levene says, ‘Sir –!’

Mahlo silences him with a gesture.

Quinn’s and Levene’s eyes meet for a dangerous second.

‘… So what is U-0055?’ Mahlo asks. ‘Really?’

‘… U-0055 is nothing to worry about,’ Quinn says. ‘It’ll come back to you as the pill takes effect. As described in the file, it is an elementary information autosuppressor. A relatively weak one. We know it’s weak, because it’s the only antimemetic Unknown whose database entry is visible to the uninitiated. Excuse me, partially visible.’

‘Partially?’ Mahlo takes a second look at the file. He scrolls a little farther down.

There is more. He tilts his head thoughtfully, reading.

Levene pats the side of his chest with one hand. A look of puzzlement crosses his face. He frowns at Quinn, but she has looked away, momentarily, checking something on her phone.

‘Then how many other antimemetic Unknowns are there?’ Mahlo asks. He closes the file. ‘This one is weak. How much stronger do they get?’

‘Of two thousand, six hundred Unknowns and counting, exactly fifty-eight are currently known to be antimemetic in nature and are the responsibility of my division,’ Quinn says. ‘It’s statistically probable that at least ten more Unknowns have antimemetic nature of which the Organisation is unaware or only intermittently aware. Obviously those figures can’t include UUs. Most of the Unknowns I’ve mentioned are safely contained, but some aren’t. There are at least two of them in the room with us right now. Don’t look. I said, don’t look! It’s pointless.’

Mahlo raises an eyebrow, but doesn’t look. He keeps his attention focused on Quinn. Levene sweeps the whole room, even behind his back.

‘There is an invisible monster that follows me around and likes to eat my memories,’ Quinn explains, patiently. ‘U-4987. You’re about to say that there’s no U-4987, but there is. It’s something I’ve had to learn to live with. Call it an exotic pet. I produce tasty memories on purpose so it doesn’t eat something important, like my passwords or how to make coffee.’

‘And?’ Levene asks. ‘What’s the other one?’

With another nod from Mahlo, Quinn goes to her bag again. This time she pulls out a gun and shoots Levene twice in the heart.

More aghast than in pain, Levene collapses against the bookcase behind him. Pulling his head around to face Quinn, he manages, ‘How did you – kn –’

Quinn stands over him, aims more carefully and shoots him a third time, this time in the head.

Mahlo, again, simply declines to react to the turn of events. ‘That’s Levene’s gun,’ he notes. ‘I didn’t see you touch him.’

‘It’s tricky to steal a firearm from someone without them noticing,’ Quinn explains, unloading it and carefully setting it down on Mahlo’s desk. ‘But stealing a firearm and then stealing all memory of the theft is a little easier. Like I said: a pet. Some pets are intelligent enough that they can be trained.’

‘Fascinating,’ Mahlo says. ‘Advantageous, on occasion, clearly. But may I ask why?’

‘Because you were supposed to be taking Class W mnestics,’ Quinn says. ‘You can’t forget a dose of Class W mnestic. It’s been tried. You can postpone a dose, but you can’t *forget* unless someone actively prevents you from taking it for a significant period of time. There’s only one person who

could get close enough to you to do that, and that's your assistant. And remember when I asked him if he was new?'

'He didn't answer,' Mahlo says. 'I thought you were being rhetorical.'

'He doesn't work here,' Quinn says. 'He's an Unknown. A humanoid antimeme. I checked the org chart, Mr Mahlo. You don't have an assistant. You have a receptionist, her name is Rowland, and she's outside. *She's* the one who screens your calls and schedules your meetings. Levene doesn't fit. He isn't wearing the pass you and Rowland and I are all wearing. Look at this room. Where does he even sit? There's no spare desk, in here or outside.'

Mahlo considers her points. He looks a shade unnerved.

Quinn goes on, 'Don't blame yourself. You're human, and these things are redaction incarnate. You need to think like a space alien to get around them.'

'It feels like I – *we* have a vulnerability here.'

'No,' Quinn reassures him. 'We have a team.'

Mahlo rises up from his chair a little, taking a better look at what is left of Levene. He asks a question that, in any other workplace, would be absurd. 'Is he dead?'

'Maybe. I'll put the corpse in our research queue and we'll see what we can see when we open him up. But there's a duality here. These are supposed to be distinct universes. It's conceptual versus concrete, figurative versus physical. It's very unusual for things to cross over. I don't know what Levene was, but he had a human body, which immediately makes him weird, even by our standards. As ever, the search for balance continues. I will let you know if we get any closer.'

'Any side effects of these pills?' Mahlo asks.

'Nausea, and dramatically increased risk of pancreatic cancer,' Quinn says. 'And very bad dreams.'

2

Introductory Antimemetics

Junior Researcher Lee's been working for the UO for all of four hours and he feels pulverised, as if an anvil were dropped on his head in that first introductory lecture. It's lunchtime, and he's found a corner so far back in the cafeteria that nobody bothers him, where he can chew and swallow mundane food, drink strong coffee, and digest the hard lessons of the morning.

On his Organisation-provided phone, he pages fretfully through the Unknown database. There are, in theory, ten thousand possible Unknowns. In practice, only a few hundred of the available slots are filled, arbitrarily chosen numbers with wide gaps between most of them, and his initial clearance level allows him to read only a few dozen of those. He knows the numbering system has been juggled at least once in the past, to obfuscate the true count. And he knows that he isn't seeing everything. A significant fraction of the apparently empty slots have entries that only become visible at higher clearance levels.

The ones he's cleared to read are bad enough. There is U-5649, a deep cave in Chile filled with millions of cubic metres of living, breathing lung tissue. There is U-0980, an untraceable Chinese manufacturer of dimly sapient, predatory refrigerators. U-4333: anthropomorphic archaea. U-7012: a novelty record from 1989 that causes serious, permanent earworm. Its excruciatingly inane lyrics and melody are both sealed away behind frightening security warnings. *Memetic threat. Psychological damage warning. Suicide warning.*

U-0003, the first occupied slot, is (90416) 2003 YK_{118}, a near-Earth asteroid with KILROY WAS HERE graffitied on it in 75-metre-tall letters, complete with the cartoon bald man. U-9985, the last, is a mystical/geological anomaly on the Southern Ocean floor that periodically

[redacted] blue whales. The redaction is in the original, Lee doesn't have clearance to see the underlying text, but this anomaly has consistently 'blanked' two or sometimes three blue whales per year, since it was discovered in – Lee blinks – 1908.

They have to be jokes. That's how most of them read. Like very bad, dark, frightening jokes. But in that first meeting, that first *demonstration* …

Lee is one of eleven Junior Researchers in the new intake. The other ten are sitting in a separate group at a separate table, chatting animatedly to one another. There are some instructors here and there, munching sandwiches. Other than them, the cafeteria – large enough to seat several hundred people – is deserted. To Lee, that seems odd. The UO site at Wyeleigh is large, a cluster of three-storey buildings with an extensive underground complex, buried casually in a forest in the west of England. Where is everybody?

A man in a grey suit walks into the cafeteria, makes eye contact with Lee, and strides over. The man's suit is sharp enough to cut. He wears a tie pin and a platinum wristwatch as big as a brick. He looks badly misplaced. UO Wyeleigh is a working site. There's training, education, research, development and analysis going on here, and even the containment of a handful of Category 1 Unknowns. Executives shouldn't be here. So what is he? A lost executive, trying to find the helipad? A researcher or instructor, dressing for the job he wants, not the job he has?

'Hell of a first day,' the man says, holding a hand out. 'Adrian Gage. G-A-G-E.'

'Lee,' Lee says. 'Simon Lee.'

Gage sits. 'Good to meet you. What accent is that, if you don't mind me asking?'

Lee blinks. 'New York,' he says. 'I'm from New York. Are you the site director?'

'You seem on edge.'

'Well, that figures, right?' Lee asks. 'You must know how that intro goes. When they wheel U-6389 out? And do that *thing* in front of you, that's completely impossible? Jesus. They gave us all an hour to try it out ourselves, try to figure out the trick. But there isn't a trick. It's just … an error in the universe. A gap. Science doesn't apply. Physics and biology go on vacation. It's messed up.'

Gage nods and smiles.

Lee goes on, ‘And there are *hundreds* of these things. I just had almost everything I know overturned. It turns out I’ve spent my entire adult life being “protected” from “dangerous” knowledge, as if the whole outside world is a … a ball pit, for under-sevens. Stepping out of that has been … humiliating. To start with. And …’ He blinks again. ‘You didn’t answer my question. What do you do here?’

‘You didn’t answer mine,’ Gage says. ‘Where are you from?’

‘I told you,’ Lee says. ‘I’m from –’

And then he just stops, his train of thought running off the end of the track into air. It’s on the tip of his tongue, the answer to Gage’s question, but he can’t get the words out. ‘That’s weird,’ he says, shaking his head.

At this point, he also notices that Gage, unlike every other person in the cafeteria, isn’t wearing his pass. This could be an honest mistake, albeit a serious one. But surely executives don’t get to the executive level without being scrupulously correct in everything they do?

‘Who are you?’ Lee asks again.

‘Your life story was fascinating.’

‘What?’

‘You spoke four languages,’ Gage tells him. ‘One now, and soon zero. Too huge an intellect to specialise, your education was a mixture of biochemistry and comparative international literature. You felt as if you’d die if you couldn’t find more foreign thoughts to cram into your head. You’ve been all over the world, hungry, and every country you’ve ever been to was like landing on another planet. You toy with anthropology, but there’s too much world for one human race to ever understand, let alone one human. There’s too much human race. We should pare it down.’

Lee nods. ‘Uh-huh. Can you give me one second?’ He gets up and hurries to another table, to the instructor he met earlier that day. When Lee gets close to her he feels a kind of staticky sensation building up. He tries to shake her shoulder, and succeeds in moving it a little, but it’s like reaching through tar. ‘Hey! There’s a problem. There’s an intruder. I think it might be an Unknown. Dr Bretton, look at me! Hello?’ She doesn’t react. He tries the gaggle of his fellow newcomers as well, but they keep chattering and eating, oblivious to him shouting and clapping in their ears. ‘Hey! People! Oli, Tom, listen to me! No, no, no, no.’

He looks back. Gage has stood up and started strolling toward him, hands in his pockets, still with that confident smile. And there’s definitely

something wrong with him now because he's visible through the tables, like an augmented reality holoprojection jammed inside Lee's eyeball.

Lee realises with a stab of fear that he can even see Gage when he blinks. His eyelids close, but Gage is still there, an apparition in what for all of Lee's life has been totally personal, private darkness. The only way he can avoid seeing Gage is to turn away, and even then he feels a radioactive prickling in the back of his eyeballs.

Lee tries to phone one of the other newcomers. The phone in the young man's pocket buzzes, and other than that, nothing happens. Nobody reacts.

'That doesn't make sense,' Lee says.

'Do you remember your father?' Gage says.

'I never knew my father,' Lee says, edging away. 'Mom raised me.'

Gage's white smile isn't moving. 'These people loved your perspective. They were going to put you to work on anomalous antimemes. But they don't remember you exist. You don't exist.'

Lee says, mainly to himself, 'There aren't any dangerous Unknowns on this site. It's all Cat. 1, they covered that in the orientation. So either you're *not* dangerous … or nobody knows you exist. And if nobody knows you exist, then that means you're either brand-new or … you're … What's an antimeme?'

'Hell of a first day,' Gage says.

'Are you sapient?' Lee asks.

'You seem on edge,' Gage says.

Lee bolts. He exits the cafeteria, turns a corner, and runs ten or eleven paces down the corridor, to where there's an elevator. He stabs the DOWN button and waits. The elevator door is highly polished, reflective. Lee catches sight of a face in the mirrored surface and nearly falls over with shock because it's a face he has never seen before, and it's apparently his own. 'Jesus! Oh, no no no,' he babbles. 'What the hell, what the *hell* –'

Gage comes around the corner, still only strolling, just as the elevator cracks open. Lee dives in and punches the lowest floor, basement level 8. It's instinctive, although he could rationalise the decision in retrospect. (He can't just get in his car and drive. It's better if Gage stays on site than if he's set loose in rational 'reality.' And to do that it's better if Lee retreats to the lowest, darkest corner of the site for which he has access. And then waits for Gage, and then locks all the doors behind them. And waits to die …) The elevator starts descending, and the apparition of Gage – visible through

doors and floors – disappears upward, shrinking with distance and perspective, but still smiling broadly down at Lee.

In the elevator, Lee walks in frightened circles. *I don't remember what my face looks like. It said it had eaten all my secondary languages, but I don't remember learning anything other than English. So – It's eating my memories. It's consuming information. And I can't contact anybody directly, which means I'm on my own.*

I'm not trained for this.

He remembers the near-empty cafeteria. And miles of totally unoccupied corridors and vacant office and lab space. *Maybe it's not just eating my memories. Maybe it eats people whole, completely removes them from history. Maybe it's been haunting the building for years and that's why the place is so empty, because it's nearly finished exterminating us all?*

I need to get help. I need to warn somebody. How? I can't talk to people, I can't call them. I should – I should put this thing in the database. A new Unknown.

But someone's got to have already thought of that.

He pulls his phone out. He pulls out the listing. Hundreds of documented Unknowns, dozens of them tagged ANTIMEME, or ANTIMEMETIC.

The number. They said the numbers were random.

No. Not random. What was the word? 'Arbitrary.'

Lee clears his mind. *Gage. G-A-G-E. 7-1-7-5.*

Ref.: U-7175 • **Cat.:** ε_1

Containment protocol: I'm disregarding the format, because time is a factor. If you're reading this, you've already been isolated from the Organisation at large. Attempts to signal for help are futile. You are now inside 7175's gullet, after ingestion and prior to digestion. You need to get to lab WY-B08-703 as soon as possible and continue the research until you find a way to stop or kill Gage, before it kills you. Don't read the rest until you're in the elevator.

Description:

At that moment the elevator doors open at basement level 8. Adrian Gage is waiting right there, still smiling disarmingly. He steps forward.

Desperate, Lee hurls his phone overarm at the entity's head. It's a solid chunk of metal and it's a dead hit. Gage screeches and reels backward, clutching one eye. Lee doesn't stop to think about the contradiction. By the time Gage recovers, Lee is out of sight, haring away down the left corridor, just echoing, fading footsteps on concrete.

Basement level 8 is a sprawling, near-incoherent network of corridors and steps. There is, at least, signage. It takes Lee a solid minute and a half of running to reach the door for lab 703. It looks like a submarine bulkhead, wider than Lee's spread arms. Lee spots the keypad from way out. Four digits. He tries 7175, and it works first time. The mechanism takes agonising seconds to open up. The door is almost as thick as it is wide.

'Come on, come on, come on!'

'Do you remember your mother?' he hears Gage murmur, as if beside one of his ears.

Lee flinches. 'I never knew my parents,' he hisses under his breath. For a moment he wonders what Gage might really mean by that, but he doesn't have time to dwell on it.

He slides through the crack between the bulkhead and its frame as soon as it opens wide enough. He punches the control that will close and lock it again, as if that'll buy him even one second. The lab inside is long, windowless of course, and stacked to the high ceiling with a jumble of equipment that Lee hardly recognises. There are shattered pieces of thick glass underfoot. In one corner there's a pair of computer terminals, locked. Lee unlocks one of them, and there's the same entry waiting for him:

Description: U-7175 is a powerful, slow-acting antimemetic kill agent taking the appearance of a male business executive calling itself 'Adrian Gage.' U-7175 is attracted to dense clusters of organically stored information – essentially, extremely knowledgeable, complicated, interesting people. U-7175 isolates its victim from the outside world by enveloping them in an antimemetic field that makes it impossible for the victim, or anything done by the victim, to be perceived or remembered. U-7175 then consumes the victim's memories and knowledge until they become vegetative and die. This process takes between 15 minutes and 2 hours.

U-7175 is not believed to be a sapient being, although it imitates the behaviour of one to the extent that it can appear sapient to the inattentive. Its victims are able to move and act freely, since it is impossible to escape once caught, or to signal for help. Communications such as written notes, graffiti and electronic mail do get sent, and persist in reality, but U-7175's effect spreads with each message, making it impossible for an external observer to perceive the message until such time as U-7175 catches them too.

The database entry that you are currently reading is created and maintained by victims of U-7175, because it is only visible to victims of U-7175. If you are reading this entry, U-7175 has caught you. You are now isolated from the Organisation and constitute an effective Organisation of one. You have between 15 minutes and 2 hours to reach UO Wyeleigh, basement level 8, laboratory 703, then familiarise yourself with the existing research, and continue this research until you find a way to contain or neutralise U-7175, or, more likely, die. If your field of expertise is not related to antimemetic containment, we sincerely apologise, and advise you to start learning. Fast.

U-7175 has consumed ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| |||| Organisation researchers since this document was created. (If you are reading this entry for the first time, please add a mark.) We estimate that at least 50% of victims never make it as far as this database entry, so the true victim count is probably more than twice this figure.

‘But how do I kill it?’ Lee shouts. He scrolls and scrolls through the research, which is chaotic and haphazardly arranged, because nobody has found the spare seconds to sort it out. There are dozens of separate lines of research, contributed in patchwork by a succession of victims, all ending with variations on the same final line: ‘I’m going to try *X*. If you’re reading this, *X* didn’t work and I’m dead, which means approach *X* is a dead end, and you have to think of something else.’

He reads. Nobody has succeeded in physically engaging with Gage. Nobody can stall him, evade him, slow him down, reason with him, or redirect him to some other target. People have tried poisoning their memories with indigestible ideas, drip-feeding their memories to Gage to slow him down, replacing their memories faster than Gage can eat them, and force-feeding Gage too many memories at once to overfeed him and blow him up. They’ve tried committing suicide by amnestic drug overdose. None of it worked. More than a hundred people, most of them apparently possessing doctorates, have slid into the maw of this thing, fought briefly, and, with a greater or lesser degree of dignity, died.

There are no remaining untried threads.

‘I’m fucked!’ Lee concludes. He glances up. Gage is not in the room yet, but Lee can see him strolling down the last stretch of corridor. He’s a totally intangible being, physical obstructions are irrelevant to him. He can’t be hurt.

Lee clutches the pocket where he used to keep his phone.

Wait a second.

He scrolls again. He finds the three or four desperate wretches who died confronting Gage physically. Combat knife. Pistol, lifted from a security guard without their noticing. Hockey stick. Lee looks up and checks the room; sure enough, the stick is there, under a table. One man, an elderly botanist far out of his depth, said he was just going to try whatever he could find that was heaviest. That explains the shattered CRT television, and the layer of thick glass on the floor near the bulkhead. There is even CCTV footage of the botanist’s attempt. He accomplishes literally nothing. Gage is a holographic ghost, and the CRT drops right through him, imploding when it hits the floor at Gage’s feet. The botanist spends the rest of the video’s running time huddled in a corner, gradually losing his mind while Gage watches placidly.

The difference being, Lee realises with his eyes boggling, *a phone is a solid brick full of information. And before me, nobody tried using information as a missile.*

Lee searches for the experiments – several of them, scattered – where the victim tried to divert Gage to a different data source. The general idea seemed to be to overload Gage by pointing him at something containing too much information: the internet, or the terabit feed from a live particle accelerator experiment, or a stack of hard drives containing the first few quadrillion binary digits of pi. But nobody could figure out a way to distract Gage's attention; prominently placed screens full of data, he would ignore; data beamed at him electromagnetically (radio, laser) had no effect. And nobody could figure out a way to tunnel the information in through the victim's mind as extra memories. It was written off as impossible, closed as a line of investigation.

The hard drives, Lee finds, are right there on the workbench next to the computer. It's a half-rack unit, a cuboidal block of metalwork about twenty-five centimetres on a side, with the mass of a heavy bowling ball. One of the most ineffective conceivable melee weapons.

Lee snatches up the three longest pieces of network cable he can find, and starts braiding them into a chain.

Then he remembers who he is, and where he is, and what his responsibilities are. He goes to the computer, to the Unknown entry, adds himself to the victim tally, and writes up exactly what it is he's about to try. Because he might not be the last one, and the world needs to know that this didn't work.

■

Gage comes through the lab bulkhead to find most of the equipment in the room toppled onto the floor, to create room for the black and silver drive array that Simon Lee is whirling around his head on a two-metre chain made of plaited network cable. It makes a low thrumming sound as it whirls. Gage is not intelligent enough to stop moving forward, and catches the array directly in the side of his head, rack mount point first, like a morning star.

Gage's defences absorb and deflect the first few trillion digits of the impact. The rest of the data arrives hard. There is a green snap of light and a noise like a subway train short-circuiting, and Gage is a pile in the corner, his head caved in and the drive array partially demolished in pieces around him.

'Eat that,' Lee declares. And half laughs, half chokes with relief.

■

'It was chewing its way up the Antimemetics Division hierarchy,' Quinn tells him in the aftermath. 'It was only a matter of time until it bit down on somebody dangerous. Congratulations on demonstrating a basic level of competence when it counted. Dozens of others couldn't.'

Lee still feels rattled. But the shock is dissipating, faster than he'd expected.

Marie Quinn, it turns out, is the Antimemetics Division chief. She is Lee's new boss. Her office is smaller than he figured it would be, a windowless box in an unremarkable corner of the main Wyeleigh building. She is small too, disappearing into her chair, behind a steaming coffee mug and a desk stacked with paperwork. *Paper. Who still uses paper?* Lee actually did a double take when he noticed the filing cabinets lined up against the other wall. Quinn wears glasses with thin blue rims. There's a picture on her desk, but it's aimed away from him. The smell of coffee in the room almost masks the lingering smell of cigarette smoke. There's no ashtray in evidence, but there is a lighter standing on its end beside Quinn's ergonomic mouse. *Ah* ... Lee recalls that this office is the last door on its corridor before a fire exit leading to a sad little interior courtyard. That's why.

'I want to say it was dumb luck,' he says. 'I want to say that I just threw my phone, it was instinct, it was muscle memory. It was my first day, and I got lucky as hell … I want to say those things, but I'm sitting here, and turning those statements over, and none of them would be true, would they?'

Quinn waits expectantly, and says nothing.

'You're not my *new* boss,' Lee says. 'You're just my boss. This isn't my first day at all. I've been working here for … well, it must be over a decade,

right? I feel … experienced. It's just that the first thing Gage ate was my memories of everything past the first day. And even then …'

'I see very little luck in what happened today,' Quinn says. 'Instinct and muscle memory are just deep forms of training. Like I said, a basic level of competence. An ability to piece your own life and all of your past knowledge back together, faster than nearly anybody else. This is what we try to drum into you. And sometimes, thankfully, it takes.'

'This isn't even the first time we've had this conversation,' Lee continues. 'There've been other incidents. With other Unknowns with memory-erasure effects. You've sat there and watched me put myself back together before.'

'And it hasn't got old yet,' Quinn admits, with something that might be approaching a smirk.

'How long does it usually take for me to recover?'

'A month,' Quinn says. 'Sometimes a month and change. But if you want the honest truth, people in this division are as competent on day one as they'll ever be. Newcomers show up firing on all cylinders, or not at all. The rest is just fine-tuning the meds. At least, that's what you always say to me.'

'… It sounds like I know a lot about newcomers,' Lee observes. 'I was eating with them in the cafeteria when Gage showed up.' His lips move silently for a second. 'Is that my job?'

Quinn raises an eyebrow, waiting for him to finish the thought.

'I work with Dr Bretton?'

She's still waiting.

'I'm an instructor,' he says.

'There. See?' Quinn says. 'You brief newly recruited antimemeticists and guide them through their first ten months in the Division. Education, training, early career guidance, introduction to hands-on research. The demo with U-6389? That's you, you're the one who delivers it. We're a short-handed division, so you also have some actual, formal research duties. Those will go away one day, once you've hired and trained enough good people to cover your workload.'

She studies her computer screen. She pushes one key. She looks back at Lee.

'Anyway … Bretton can handle the new intake alone while you recover. And while you're recovering, I need a completed U-7175 entry. I need you

to nail down the model for Gage's predatory pattern and exactly how you neutralised it. And I want you to work out what it did with the bodies. Were they incinerated, disintegrated, are they still lying around the site in cloaked heaps? You can rope some of the newcomers into your investigation if you like, it might be educational. Oh, and I need countermeasures, in case it comes back.'

'It's coming back?'

'Oh, you know this one, Simon. You learn this on day one.'

Lee thinks. 'Ah … There it is. *It takes a lot to kill an idea.*'

Quinn beams, satisfied, faintly prideful.

Lee asks, 'What does it take?'

Quinn says nothing for a long time. It looks as if she knows the answer, but she's debating whether to share it with him.

She says, 'Perhaps we'll get to that on day two.'

3

Unforgettable, That's What You Are

'Andy, it's finished.'

Andrew Hilton is more than ninety years old and hasn't stood at his full height in ten. He was a tower of a man in his prime, two metres tall and built like a boxer. Nearly nobody he ever met was able to look him straight in the eye, at least not and tell him 'No.' Illness has gradually eaten away at that over the years. He feels as if he lives at the bottom of a deep bath, with everybody he ever meets looking down at him from slippery, unscalable walls, none of them able to reach down to help him. He's spent his final months crumpled up in bed like a dying spider, changing to a corpse's colour ahead of time. It might have been bearable if he'd lost his mind, but he remembers what he used to be: a leader, a powerhouse. He used to be able to alter the course of terrible events for the better, to get justice. He used to protect people.

'Andy. You can wake up now.'

But there's a warm wind through his thin, colourless hair, and there's direct sunlight coming down on him now, and the heat is filling him up like a tonic. He's outside; it's been too long since he was last outside. When he opens his eyes he sees the lake, 'his' lake, the one in the North he used to have all to himself every summer. He's on his sailboat, lying on a thin foam mattress laid on the deck. It is a near-cloudless day, a travel industry promotional photography day, one of maybe two the lake sees in any given year. The water is calm and deep, a clear blue verging on black.

It's perfect. He didn't know he had the strength left to safely leave the hospital, let alone travel this far. But if he'd put his mind to it and selected a final moment, this might have been it. A half-mile away behind the boat is the little lake house, empty, dwarfed by the mountain of dense forest rising up behind it. His eyes are still recovering, it's just a squarish smudge of

cream, but he knows it. There's a red dot to one side of the house, which could be a vehicle. Not his vehicle.

'Do you remember me?'

Hilton focuses. The woman speaking is seated on the deck beside him. She is around fifty years old, with her wavy, not to say unruly, hair pulled back into a pale blue scrunchie. Her hair is very dark and streaked with grey. She wears glasses with thin blue rims, and a pale grey hiking top with a quarter zip. Laid on the deck in front of her are a light hiking jacket in cyan and a large plastic box full of medical supplies, with a separate little box for sharps disposal. As he watches, she disposes of a used needle, and puts a small bottle of colourless liquid back in its compartment.

A dim memory surfaces and starts taking shape. The woman is twice as old now as when he knew her last, and she moves with twice the confidence. It seems absurd, on reflection, that he could forget her. He taught her everything he – Well. Everything he could remember at the time. He remembers her as a field operative. He remembers sending her through hell, a fistful of times. 'Sheridan.'

'Andy,' the woman softly explains, 'you died. You died surrounded by grieving family. They loved you very much, and they cried over you. The funeral for the fake is in a few days, but unfortunately you won't be able to see it yourself. You're dead now, and this is what comes next.'

'Sheridan. Marie.' Hilton feels gold spreading through his bones, miracle juice.

It's Quinn now, but she doesn't correct him. 'When you retired, Andy, we did what we do to all of us who retire; what all of us agree to when we sign up. We gave you some medicine that made you forget. As you stepped out of the door for the last time, all the work you did for us – great work, which saved lives – evaporated away, and your cover story sealed over those years and became reality. That's why you've spent your whole retirement believing that you were a former section chief at MI5. It's what you wanted, it's what we wanted, it's what you agreed to.

'But you, alone, agreed to something else as well. And you must be starting to remember, now, what that something else was. I've injected you with a serum that throws the human ageing process into hard reverse, and it affects everything: organs, tissues, memories. You'll be coming up on it soon. Remember?'

'Yes,' Hilton croaks, remembering, dizzy.

‘You signed over your final twelve hours to us. You asked for a full and happy and well-deserved retirement … but now, for the last day, you work for us again, because of one particular job. I have it in writing here, you see? Do you recognise your signature, and mine? I witnessed.’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you remember who you are?’

‘Doctor Andrew Hilton, of the Unknown Organisation,’ he says. ‘Antimemetics Division founder.’

Quinn smiles with relief. It’s good to see him again.

‘We need some memories from you,’ she explains. ‘Memories that nobody else in the world has access to, and that are buried so deeply that we can’t extract them without killing you. So this afternoon, that’s what we’re going to do. We’re going to extract those memories, and once we’re done, you’ll be dead.’

Hilton has already begun to regress to the time when he himself set this wheel in motion. He remembers, very clearly, discovering the mystery in his own head, the blank spots that he couldn’t explain, and couldn’t safely access with any kind of chemical or physical technique. He remembers deferring the mystery until now.

‘What happened in ’76?’ Quinn asks.

■

Hilton sits up. His skin is beginning to clear, and his breathing is improving.

He feels as if his brain has been cleaved in two by a wormhole. His eyes are focusing on different time periods. In his right eye he sees the lake and the boat he’s dying on; in his left he sees a collage of electrifyingly familiar past faces and places. Ed Hix with his grin and thick glasses and baby face, looking like some kid dressed up as an Organisation researcher; the original lab crew at Shenfingley, great techs but a hopeless excuse for a cricket team; young Marie with steel-strong nerves and a mind like a laser; suits and lab coats and Hazardous Response operations. And everywhere paperwork, and floods of serial numbers.

He starts to speak.

1976 was the year he founded the Division. He brainstormed the whole thing in one legendary week, hammering out the science and then distilling

the first chemical mnestic with the help of a handpicked trio of assistants, the first antimemetics researchers. No antimemetic Unknowns had even been observed up to that point – the entire operation was a shot in the dark – and yet the team immediately struck gold. Passive black holes of information, active predatory infovores, unrememberable worms that covered the human skin like dust mites … contagious bad news, self-sealing secrets, living murders, Chinatowns.

Quinn wonders if there might be something more serious awry with Hilton's head. His version of events is hopelessly romantic. In Quinn's experience, nobody looks back on Organisation work fondly.

'But it was all too fast,' Hilton says. 'Containment protocols take time to develop, much more time than I took. I discovered more Unknowns than the entire rest of the Organisation that year, essentially single-handedly. It was too *easy.* It was as if I knew it all already, and I was just catching up.

'And then … one day I realised I couldn't remember my life before Antimemetics. I knew I'd been an Organisation operative for decades prior – that was where I got the authority to start my own division – but there was nothing else there. It was a wall in my mind, which even mnestics couldn't get me past. I went to the paper archives and looked at my own personnel file, and …'

Hilton trails off. Not because he's forgotten what to say next; it's deliberate. The trailing-off is exactly what happened.

'You woke up back at your desk half a working day later, remembering nothing,' Quinn says. 'You went through the loop a dozen times before someone realised what was happening and broke you out of it.'

Quinn knows all of this. The file still exists, and the antimemetic effect still clouds the back half of it. All of this would be over in a second if any of that back half could be read.

Hilton goes on. 'When I assembled the evidence what I found was … well, a hole. Like a jigsaw with only the edges and corners. So I did the only thing I could do, I looked at the shape of the hole. And, together with Ed Hix and others, I formed a theory.

'This is not the first Antimemetics Division. Before 1976, there was another one. I was part of that division; possibly, I led it. Certainly, I am the only known survivor of it. *Something* happened to that team. Some antimemetic force chewed up and swallowed the *idea* of the Antimemetics Division itself. I was let off lightly; I lived. The rest of those people,

whoever they were, however many of them there were, are missing without trace.'

Quinn nods. 'This much we know already. I was there when you wrote the note, remember? The question is known. It's the answer that we can't get to without killing you. It's the answer that we've waited all these years to get at. I'm here to ask you, Andy: *What. Happened?*'

Hilton covers his right eye and grimaces, trying. He fails. 'It's not there. You haven't sent me back far enough. There's still that wall in my head. I remember why the question exists, but I don't remember the answer. I need more.'

Quinn swabs his arm, and gives him another ten years.

■

Excerpt from Document L407-098, *User's Guide to Chemical Mnestics:*

> The Class X mnestic drug is a failed eternal youth serum. X rejuvenates both mind and body by up to [redacted] years, but its effects are temporary, wearing off in a matter of hours. Furthermore, as the drug wears off, the suppressed time reasserts itself all at once, causing a harmful 'whiplash' effect on the subject's physiology. X can rejuvenate an individual safely by up to 30 days, but with stronger doses the whiplash effect becomes dangerous, and past a threshold of 16–18 months it is fatal in all known subjects.
>
> X's restorative effect on the human memory is essentially a side effect. However, this side effect is so useful that it has become the drug's main practical purpose. The Antimemetics Division uses small doses of X to temporarily sharpen or restore memories from the recent past. This aids Organisation operatives in the accurate recall of incidents involving memory-corrupting entities.

■

Hilton seems like another man once the second X dose takes effect. Wrinkles are sliding back up into his face, muscle mass is returning to his

limbs, but it takes Quinn a second to realise the real reason why; she's just booted him back across the field/desk operative transition. Hilton has regressed a little way past senior management, the realm where most problems were solved by saying the correct words, and into a time where he survived through physical fitness, situational alertness and hands-on experience.

Hilton gets to his feet for the first time in years. He watches a bird – a heron – fly the length of the lake shore. It has immense grey wings, almost as broad as Hilton is tall. It carries a long, skinny branch in its bill, for nesting material. The bird drifts past them at an easy-to-track speed, but somehow it passes behind something, and Hilton loses sight of it.

He doesn't sit down again. He smooths down his hospital gown, wishing he had a sweater. And some fishing gear. He brushes a hand through new, old hair. His sideburns are back.

'We weren't Organisation at first,' he says. 'The first Antimemetics Division was a British Army project. The Ideational Research Establishment. It was formed during World War II. We called ourselves the Unthinkables.

'It began as an experiment in advanced propaganda. The objective was to cut through the physical conflict and find a way to rupture the ideological machine, to obliterate the *idea* of Nazism. After two years, enough theory had been developed that the task had been reduced to an engineering problem. Another two years, and the engineering problem had been reduced as well, and what we had built was a very special kind of bomb.

'Unfortunately, we didn't understand what we'd built. Back then, we didn't have the mnestics or the shielding that we could use to protect ourselves. We didn't understand how far ahead you need to think when you're working with this kind of technology.

'We got looped. It was textbook. We built the unthinkable bomb, took it to Skye and test-detonated it … and it worked perfectly. The bomb destroyed itself, and erased its own successful detonation, and flattened all the knowledge that had gone together to build it. We forgot that we had ever built the bomb at all, and started over.

'To our credit, we realised quite rapidly what must have happened. There was a four-year gap in our progress now, and there was no other way to explain it. But by the time we put the pieces together the second time, the war was almost over. The Nazis had been defeated by the Soviets, by

relatively conventional means, and the Japanese had been broken by the atomic bombings. So we completed the second antimemetic bomb, and after that, we sat on it.'

Marie Quinn is silent for a long moment.

'You don't buy it,' Hilton observes.

'The timeline is way off,' she says. 'It's off by almost sixty years. You're telling me that the British Army was secretly developing antimemetic weaponry as early as the 1940s? Not theory. Real machines?'

'Indeed.'

'It … I know what I'm saying when I say this. It doesn't seem possible.'

'Oh, Marie. You've been working here how long?'

'I know. Too long.'

Hilton flashes a smile he hasn't flashed in decades. 'You've lost sight of what we could do before the transistor. We were resourceful, we had to be. And canny. This is why you resurrected me, isn't it? For the sake of one more good war story. God, I've missed shop talk.'

'I resurrected you because I want a very specific question answered,' Quinn says. 'Although I can see that in a way you've already answered it. This bomb was the means, wasn't it? The old Antimemetics Division –'

'The Unthinkables.'

' – bombed themselves. Somehow.'

'That's right,' Hilton says.

'From context,' Quinn goes on, 'I'm guessing you knew what you were doing that time. I'm guessing it wasn't an accident.'

■

The displaced half of Hilton's brain is anchored in the seventies now, so the true history of the original Unthinkables is an open book to him. And he reads:

'After the war the second bomb collected dust for years. Oversight started to flicker out. We completed our research and production objectives, and were given no further objectives. Funding became shaky and we couldn't figure out why. It wasn't entirely clear that the project overseers knew what we were doing. Or even that they remembered we existed. It

was a side effect from our experimentation, of course, one we had no way of managing at the time.

'Then, in 1951, a cult movement began in Ojai, California. In a matter of days it was a national phenomenon in the US, and still growing. It reached Britain in the middle of its second week. Dominated the headlines. It was a mad fad, a kind of mania. And it was wrong. In the team, we had the theory, the analytical tools; we could see that everything about this thing was *incorrect.* The philosophy behind the cult was, well, warped, like any cult's, but beyond that, it was unnaturally contagious. It was taking high-profile public figures by the score; it was altering government-level decisions in our country and the States, and it was starting to find a toehold in Europe. This was week two. To spread that far in months would have been vaguely credible, but days was simply impossible. News, and telecommunications technology, just didn't work like that back then. This was half a century before social media. It was the opposite of unthinkable; it was unforgettable.

'We knew that this was our hour. This was what our bomb was designed for. We prompted our overseers for guidance. But there were no orders.

'At the time that the outbreak began, we were a special British Army laboratory, through and through. As we'd always been. Fifteen days into the crisis the Organisation "acquired" us. All our classified research, all our material resources, and all the compliant top staff, including me. Anybody who wouldn't comply was politely erased and sent back to the army. Twenty hours after the acquisition, we deployed the second bomb and the cult was gone. Nobody remembered it, nobody remembered being part of it, zero loss of life. A completely clean detonation.

'That was the real beginning. The Organisation opened our eyes, showed us the true, global scope of the mystery. What people were truly in danger from, and what had to be done to keep them safe. The metaphorical equation, with us on one side, and all of those fearful Unknowns on the other. Do you still teach it that way? To the newcomers?'

Quinn nods.

Hilton frowns at her. 'My God, what am I thinking? Sheridan. How are you?'

'Andy, we don't have unlimited time here.'

'Spare me two damned minutes. You look well.'

‘I …’ Quinn reflects. ‘Well. I’m still here. I’m running the whole show now.’ She rummages in a pocket and shows him her pass.

‘Chief of Antimemetics? Entirely to be expected,’ Hilton says, approvingly. ‘I had an inkling, after working with you for a few years, that you might be a lifer. Some people just have the right character for the work. Of course, I’d never say that to an impressionable young operative’s face. It can be a frightening prospect. But some people just have that *stance,* where one senses that they could make quite productive use of a little authority.’

‘Mmm.’ Quinn’s felt the same way about some of her own operatives from time to time.

‘How long have you been with the Organisation now? Twenty years?’

Quinn waves an irascible hand. It’s more than that, and she doesn’t like to think about it. ‘Every year I tell myself, “Next year you’ve got to get out.” And I never do it.’

A wry smile. ‘Why? I know why, but tell me in your words.’

‘… Because every now and then I make a decision no one else could make that saves about a thousand people’s lives. And … I admit it, it’s a rush. And also, I couldn’t forgive myself if I left the Organisation without that capacity … And those two things added together become a kind of … addiction.’

‘It’s okay to enjoy helping people, Sheridan.’

‘And it’s Quinn, now.’

Hilton beams. ‘Ah! I knew it!’

‘His name’s Adam. He’s not part of the Organisation.’

‘Perfect. I’m happy for you. Don’t let go of him. Whoever the poor sap is.’

‘Andy, please. We’re on a schedule. What happened after 1951?’

■

Hilton focuses on the water. From a point in the lake ahead of him, circular ripples begin to spread.

He says, ‘With the Organisation’s resources, we were able to develop the first memory-reinforcing treatments. We had a workflow. Funding became stable. We recruited. The pace of research ramped up. We built new bombs, to all-new designs. And every new scientific advancement uncovered new

hidden Unknowns. I breezed the Organisation field test and went out catching ghosts. My life turned into the Twilight Zone. I …'

He blinks hard. He covers one of his eyes, then the other.

'I remember all these different people now,' he says. 'It feels like my memory is in stereo. Almost every antimemetic Unknown we caught before the wipe in '76, we caught again soon after the wipe. That means I remember two acquisition logs for each one. I remember two Antimemetics teams and I don't remember who belongs on which side of the wall. The terminology bounced around a lot, we changed names a few times before we were "Antimemetics' … Do you remember Beatrix Wilson? The neurologist? Studied the mechanisms of anomalously accelerated memory loss … wrote a library on the subject …'

Quinn doesn't. Something splashes in the water behind her, distracting her for an instant, but she looks around too slowly to catch what it is.

Hilton goes on, 'Dr Kitaka? Jamie Sitt?'

'Andy, this is important. Are you at the right place in your own timeline to remember what happened yet?'

Hilton concentrates. And he discovers that he is. Something changes in his eyes, as he stops reminiscing. He speaks more slowly now, his voice dropping almost to a whisper:

'There is an Unknown that your division has never seen. The Unknown that my division couldn't contain. The escapee. This is what you wanted, isn't it, Marie?'

'Yes,' she says. 'This is the data I'm killing you for.' She leaves a gap where, if she felt there was anything to apologise for, she would apologise.

Hilton locks eyes with her. 'It came at us. We weren't prepared to be attacked directly. It was eating my division alive. It came at us so hard and so fast that the only way we could stop it was to self-destruct. If you know it exists, it knows you exist. The more you know about it, the more it knows about you. If you can see it, it can see you. And it *hates to be seen.*'

His left eye flashes like a cat's. Quinn blinks, suddenly acutely aware of her surroundings. She runs the logic, as fast as she can.

I know it exists.

'But –'

Hilton says, 'And you *can* see it. You've been staring right at it all afternoon.'

There are only two of them on the boat. The boat is anchored more than half a mile from any of the lake shores. She hasn't brought any backup with her. There's a radioactive prickling in her brain. She doesn't –

Red flag. Why didn't I bring any backup with me? That doesn't make sense.

There should be a team at the lake house. There should be a Hazardous Response operative and a medic here on the boat with me. And a second boat. At minimum. Am I all alone out here? Why did I do that?

She pulls her gun, but doesn't aim it at anything, yet. 'Where is it? Is it in you?'

Hilton's voice is becoming urgent. He covers both of his eyes again. 'Destroying all knowledge of it was the only way to contain it. And restoring my memories was a foolproof way to bring it back!'

It's in his eyes. His left eye. Quinn backs up to the other side of the boat, draws a bead on the centre of Hilton's head, and says, 'Andy. Are you still in there?'

'There is a way to fix this,' Hilton hisses, dropping to his knees. He keeps his eyes screwed up and gropes his way forward blindly, on his hands and knees.

'Andy, you need to tell me what this thing is.'

'That's the opposite of what we need to do,' Hilton says. 'You need to set another bomb off.'

'We don't have that bomb, Andy. We lost that technology –' Quinn begins.

'You've always had it. There's an engineering lab at Wyeleigh. You know it. An underground complex the size of a football pitch. In pristine condition, and totally disused. Why? Think about it. That's where your bomb's installed.'

'But that just sets us back to square one. If I set the bomb off,' Quinn says, knowing full well that she is hundreds of miles from it and can't hope to reach it in time anyway, 'how do we contain this thing? When?'

'We won't,' Hilton tells her. 'We can't, ever. Don't you get it? The whole Division is looped. We start the Division, we run headlong into this thing, and either it eats us, or we wipe ourselves out in self-preservation. Humans have been looping through this problem over and over again since long before the forties. Maybe for centuries.'

His blindly probing fingers find the medical box. It's too late. As Quinn watches, a waving black pedipalp coated in dark hairs forces its way out through Hilton's left eye. Hilton screams. Still on his knees, he grasps the pedipalp with both hands and tries to break it, but it's solid, as if it has bones inside it.

'What is it?' Quinn shouts at him. 'That can't be the whole story. What does it want? Can it reason, can it speak? Does it have a name?'

'It has a n – a number –'

'What number?'

'Five,' Hilton begins. 'Five. I can't –'

A second spider leg, significantly longer, slides out through Hilton's trachea, ruining his throat and voice box and producing a gout of blood. He gurgles. A third leg shoots from his abdomen, like a spear.

Quinn shoots Hilton in the head. Hilton falls forward, limp, then rises back up, lifted by the three spider appendages as if he is a puppet being controlled by something gigantic and invisible. His arms raise, as if suspended by wires.

Quinn squints. She fires four more shots over Hilton's head, at the likely body mass of the invisible puppeteer, and fires the rest of her rounds almost directly into the sky. The whole boat vibrates, along with the surface of the lake, as if responding to infrasound or a localised earthquake. Then the boat shudders violently and starts to lift out of the water, raised by more unseen appendages.

Quinn holsters her gun and goes for the medical box herself, pulling it away from Hilton's floating feet. There's a compartment with L_2 amnestic, the fast-acting stuff, in serum form. She does a hurried burst of mental arithmetic, measures out the correct dosage in a syringe, and, hands shaking, plunges it into a wrist vein. The boat is still rising. Whatever the monster is, it's colossally tall, or maybe it flies.

She is, of course, already dosed up to the eyeballs with mnestic drugs. Otherwise, she wouldn't have been able to perceive any of this. Organisation medical literature warns in the strongest possible terms against putting both kinds of drug into the same brain. Best-case scenario, this ends with her in the hospital.

They're fifteen metres up in the air now, five storeys. There's a stabbing pain developing in her left eye. She kicks her shoes off and throws the gun

away. She goes to the edge and contemplates the drop for a disbelieving second. She jumps.

It takes two heart-stopping seconds of free fall for her to hit the water. The chilled hammer blow of the impact is enough to blank her mind out. By the time she surfaces she doesn't remember where she fell from, or why. And likewise, the skyscraper-sized being that claimed Hilton and the boat has forgotten about her.

'What in the world?' she gasps, treading water. 'What the hell, where the hell?'

There is nothing above her, no explanation. Only the symptoms of the drug cocktail give her any indication of what just happened: a sensation like hundreds of tiny lumps of hot solder in her brain, and pain and exhaustion spreading to all of her tendons. She wants to die.

Swim, part of her says. *Get to shore first. Then you can die.*

■

The response team finds her around dusk, unconscious on the lake shore. They stabilise her in the helicopter, then take her back to Wyeleigh for examination, and to have her system flushed.

She spends a solid eight days at home, detoxifying: no mnestics, no amnestics, no exposure to dangerous memory-corrupting Unknowns, no work visitors. 'No work,' the doctor also tells her husband.

'You know I can't stop her,' he replies. Adam Quinn is in his fifties, gaunt and well manicured, with rimless glasses and thick, greying hair. He does his best, distracting his wife with soup, fresh gingerbread, historical fiction, and bingeable crime miniseries. But Marie is working again, from her bed, by midway through day three. It takes a while for her sleep cycle to straighten out again, and whenever she wakes up, day or night, she gropes for her work phone, like a reflex action.

It isn't anywhere near the first missing event in Marie Quinn's life, nor is she the first person in the Antimemetics staff to lose time, but the experience is no less disturbing for its familiarity. As per procedure, she writes a report detailing everything she can remember. The gap in her memory is about sixteen hours wide. Class X could help fill the gap, but a mnestic dose that strong, now, would cost her an organ.

■

Then she returns to the office and adds her report to the extensive, complex map of missing time that the whole division maintains collectively. The map has accreted gradually in a windowless spare meeting room with red-painted walls. It is a map of holes, sprawling across the entirety of the longest wall in the room, and most of the next wall, and some of the floor.

Quinn almost slips and falls as she's pinning her new notes up. A piece of paper, a personnel profile, has come unstuck from the wall and fallen to the floor. The printout is several years older than anything else on the wall. The profile is for a senior Organisation official named Jason Lo. Quinn doesn't recognise the name, or the face. She tries to figure out where on the map it might have fallen from, and fails.

She spends an hour rearranging the rest of the map, pinning things together. Some of the reports of missing time are from years or decades in the past. The majority of them originate not from the Antimemetics Division but from the Memetics Division, which is ten times the size and extremely well Organised, with battalions of trained operatives on every continent. There are events from all over the continental United States, and the UK and Ireland, and Scandinavia, and India, and Oceania. It's a mess. The Memetics Division doesn't seem to have a good handle on the fact that they're losing time.

Not that having a handle on that fact seems to be helping the Antimemetics Division figure out where the time is going, or what it means.

Many of the events are dubious in their authenticity or merit. Some of the notes are so obviously irrelevant that Quinn screws them up and discards them. Then she becomes woozy – the doctor promised dizzy spells – and settles heavily into the beaten-up office chair in the corner.

Her doctor promised a lot of things. He has begun voicing serious concerns about the deleterious effects that prolonged mnestic drug usage is starting to have on her endocrine system. He dropped an appointment into the middle of her schedule for next week, to discuss dosage limits. Quinn plans to dodge the appointment. Specifically, she plans to reschedule the appointment for one month later, over and over again, forever. Because she has work to do.

Sitting there, leaning on the arm of the chair that isn't broken, she stares at the map. In the data, there are very faint patterns starting to form. An

outline is slowly becoming visible. The outline of an enemy, perhaps, or a group of enemies. She removes her glasses and grinds the heels of her hands into her eyes, concentrating, trying to make the fog clear. But the thing she wants to see isn't there.

Someone knocks on the meeting room door.

'Yep,' Quinn calls out.

The man who enters is a misleadingly stocky, perpetually unshaven individual, somewhere just shy of forty, and inarguably the most dangerous person on the site. He is the Division's physical fitness and combat instructor and the leader of its two Hazardous Response Teams. His name is Geoff Ives. He carries a few fragments of paper of his own. Reports, gathered from the team who recovered Quinn at the lake. With a curt nod to Quinn, he heads over to the wall, locates Quinn's report at the tail end of the timeline, and pins his notes up beside it.

He says, 'My team's version of what happened is pretty consistent. It's not a long story.'

Quinn can't find the motivation to get up and look for herself. 'What is their story?'

'An emergency beacon was triggered at 18:04:17 UTC last Monday. The point of origin of the beacon was in the vicinity of the lake where you were recovered, most likely on the lake surface itself somewhere. We can't be more specific. The beacon itself hasn't been recovered.'

'I don't remember triggering a beacon,' Quinn says. But then, she doesn't remember anything. She's accepted that attempting to retrieve that memory would probably kill her.

Ives says, 'Team Xi-1 was airborne by 18:10. The beacon cut out at 18:26 while they were still en route, which is why we don't have a precise fix. Despite an unrelated mechanical issue with the aircraft, for which the pilot had to compensate, they made excellent time and reached the lake at 19:50. You were located at 19:53. You were loaded into the aircraft and en route home by air within four minutes of being located. Four team members were left behind to investigate the surroundings. They found your vehicle, and an abandoned lake house. Nothing of interest.'

The account dovetails with Quinn's. She stands up. She moves closer to Ives, and squints at the reports on the wall for a while. Then she glances at the door, as if it could open at any time.

And she points at one of the Hazardous Response reports, at an alphanumeric code embedded in the emergency beacon's outgoing signal. 'This isn't my code,' she murmurs. 'Someone else triggered the beacon.'

Ives frowns. He pulls his phone out and looks the code up in the UO personnel files. There are no matches. The code is no one's.

He doesn't say anything.

'Someone was with me on the lake,' Quinn says. 'This person saved my life. I could have died. In the lake or on the shore. They might have been acting as my bodyguard, I don't know … And there's *nothing*. Nothing on this wall. Nothing in the files. Nothing in the lake. This alphanumeric ID is all we get. Who *was* this? Where are they, right now? What *happened*?'

Ives looks doubtful. Not so much about the facts, but about how to respond.

'We're losing people as well as time,' Quinn says. 'This is one person. But there could have been a dozen people with me on that mission. Or trip, or trap, or whatever the hell it was. I don't go unprepared … We have empty roles. And empty spaces in the personnel files.'

'I will admit that we are short-handed,' Ives says.

'"Short-handed." We have two hundred people. If we want to do our job the way it needs to be done, we should have two thousand. Do you agree?'

'Yes.'

'How long have we been actively recruiting for, and this is all we have to show for it?'

'As long as I can remember,' Ives says.

'Geoff. How far back is that?'

He can't answer the question.

'When did this even start?' Quinn asks him. 'The Antimemetics Division. Who founded us? When?'

The Ones Who Walk Very Slowly

Ref.: U-2256 • **Cat.:** ω

Containment protocol: Information about U-2256 is subject to a gradual antimemetic corrosion effect. Corrosion occurs at differing rates depending on the level of detail/accuracy in the information and the physical complexity of the storage medium. In-depth academic papers, photographs and information stored electronically decay rapidly; broad descriptions, pencil sketches and paperwork decay slowly.

Accordingly, this electronic database entry should describe U-2256 only in broad terms. Detailed information about U-2256's appearance, theorised evolutionary ancestry, biology, diet, behaviour, vocalisations, life cycle, intelligence, ecological role and cultural significance should be stored in hard copy in vault 1053C at the UO Primary Archive Facility at Black River. The rate of corrosion in both data sources should be monitored carefully, although at present no technique is known for halting or reversing such corrosion.

Although these antimemetic effects linger and rate *ω* categorisation, U-2256 itself is extinct and does not require a containment protocol.

Description: U-2256 (*Cryptomorpha gigantes*) is a species of gigafauna that was endemic to the South Pacific Ocean around the islands of Polynesia. U-2256 was one of the very few recorded species known to have developed rudimentary perceptual/ 'antimemetic' camouflage, rendering them nearly impossible for other sentient

beings to perceive or remember. This adaptation is theorised to have arisen in order to elude predators.

U-2256 was the largest species to ever live on Earth. Resembling spindly, vertically elongated giraffes or brachiosauruses, adults of the species grew to over 1,000 metres in height. They weighed no more than 4 tons, with most of their mass being 'camouflaged' by a very similar adaptation. With their broad, dish-shaped feet, they were able to walk directly on the surface of the ocean without sinking.

U-2256 navigated the ocean alone or in [redacted] of 2 to as many as 2,000 individuals. They were reluctant to approach land, especially inhabited islands, usually staying more than 30 kilometres offshore.

U-2256 was noted for its macroscopic symbiont gut fauna, U-2256-E (*Venteuthis monopsii*), sometimes incorrectly referred to by Organisation staff as 'germs.' These formed complex societies inside U-2256's extensive digestive biome, and possessed significant cognitive ability (see attached documents).

Acquisition: Polynesian natives of the island of Takaluʻi used a substance called *kāketou* for recreational and religious purposes. As well as being a moderate psychedelic, this drug had mnestic properties, suppressing antimemetic effects and making entities camouflaged in this way easier to see and remember. Thus, the Takaluʻians were for millennia the only people able to see U-2256. In Takaluʻian mythology U-2256 were wandering spirits whom the gods had charged with maintaining the horizon, to ensure that the sky and the water never mixed. They [redacted] as well-meaning and friendly, but unintelligent and often deficient in their duties, resulting in storms and typhoons. They were called *lopoʻongakau,* 'the ones who walk very slowly.'

Takaluʻi was colonised by the British in the early 19th century. By 1890 British missionaries had converted most of the islanders to Protestantism.

In 1991 an Organisation-internal biochemistry study noted that the traditional *kāketou* substance bore a strong chemical resemblance to the Organisation's own Class W mnestic. An Organisation anthropologist was assigned to follow [redacted] the Takaluʻian legend, and

became the first outsider to observe [redacted]-2256. An observation [redacted] was quickly [redacted] on the island to study the creatures. Routine containment analysis found that U-2256 fell in Category 1 and required no containment protocol, or even particular [redacted] secrecy.

History: U-[redacted] immediately proved to be impossible to capture photographically. Photographic negatives of the species faded into transparency over the [redacted] a few minutes. Similar decay [redacted] affected videotape, audio tape, celluloid film, digital and electronic scans etc. The observation team soon returned most of their equipment to inventory and proceeded using pencils and [redacted]. At the time, it [redacted] believed that such recordings would be effectively permanent.

U-2256's population declined slightly in 1992 and 1993, then dropped sharply from 1994 onward. A combination of contributing factors were observed: illness, infertility and an [redacted] rate of stillbirths.

In 2002 a field generator was developed that could penetrate and neutralise U-2256's antimemetic [redacted], allowing for conventional photography. The first and only close-up photograph of one of the creatures instantly killed it. It was concluded that direct observation of U-2256 is injurious to [redacted]. This adaptation is believed to have arisen as a means of detecting predators, just as U-2256's antimemetic camouflage protected them from those same predators. Use of [redacted] generator was immediately curtailed.

It was subsequently hypothesised that the Organisation's ongoing passive observation of the species was intense enough to have harmful effects on U-2256, and that [redacted] was what was driving the species [redacted] extinction. Opinions differed sharply [redacted] veracity of this hypothesis, over [redacted] thoroughly it should be tested, and over what [redacted] be done if it proved to be true. Several extreme options were [redacted], including [redacted] exterminating [redacted]-[redacted] to preserve the data, and completely expunging the data to preserve [redacted]-2256. No firm conclusions [redacted].

In 2003 observation of U-2256 was scaled back significantly, and the Organisation [redacted] focus from gathering [redacted] data to analysing [redacted] data. However,

U-2256's population continued to [redacted]. The last individual died near Tokelau [redacted] October 30, 2006.

In [redacted] discovered [redacted] the antimemetic camouflage [redacted], also characterised as 'decay' or 'corrosion', was spreading through paper records of [redacted]. As of [redacted], more [redacted] 60% of [redacted] documents are [redacted], even with [redacted] strong mnestic dose. The effect is even [redacted] Unknown entry itself, despite [redacted] shielding and redundancy in [redacted] system.

Since [redacted] extinct, [redacted] new data [redacted] it can be generated. It is [redacted] that full contamination [redacted] three to eight years.

II

ESCAPEE

1

Immemorial

‘Ms Quinn! Ms Quinn.’

Marie Quinn has just finished an engineering interlock meeting and is headed back toward her office for a cigarette. Someone is running up to meet her in the corridor. Quinn recognises her as Dr Oli Morgan, a trainee field researcher who joined the Antimemetics Division only six months ago. Part of Simon Lee’s new brood.

‘Dr Morgan. Can I help you with something?’

‘Uhm.’ Morgan interlocks her fingers nervously. She is a full head taller than Quinn and half her age, with an athletic build, incorrigibly curly hair and exceedingly thick glasses. She lacks experience. But she is very smart, and she is learning very fast. In another year, she’ll be among the best people the Division has, or has ever had, and Quinn is looking forward to that. Quinn loves nothing more than competent people.

Still, as the pause lengthens, that day of competence seems to be very much in the future. ‘Dr Morgan, I normally expect my people to get to the point a little quicker than this.’

‘There’s – a stone in the forest behind the site,’ Morgan blurts. ‘It’s monumental. It’s like a skyscraper, it blots out the Sun. Do you know what I’m talking about?’

‘Yes.’

‘But I’ve never seen it before. I don’t understand how it’s possible that I never saw it. It casts a shadow across the whole site. I mean – was it always there?’

‘Yes.’

‘Is this because –’

‘You took your first routine dose of ops-grade mnestics this morning, yes.’

Morgan seems alarmed. ‘That’s how it works? Something that big can just be right there and we don’t see it?’

‘Yeah.’ Quinn checks her watch, and mentally moves some scheduled commitments around. *Extend this ‘smoke break’ to the rest of the afternoon. Leave my weekly inspection of U-2200 where it is. Review promotion cases after the gym instead of before. Evening meal … at this rate, never …*

Morgan, suffocating under the weight of follow-up questions, finally asks, ‘What is it?’

Quinn gestures to her left, down the corridor, indicating that she is about to walk, and that Morgan should follow her. ‘I’ll show you.’

■

In the database it’s U-9429. Morgan hasn’t read the entry; she doesn’t have access.

The stone is a single, unbroken, 91-by-91-by-147-metre vertical cuboid of ancient, weathered, dark basalt. It sits at a very slight angle, leaning fractionally to the north. Its regular angles clearly mark it as a carved object, a human-made artifact. It rises out of the forest to the east of UO Wyeleigh and dominates, not to say obliterates, the views in that direction from the windows of the site’s main block. It is, by volume, massively bigger than the site itself, even including its underground extents. It looms. It is absolutely unmissable. The idea that anyone could fail to notice it for any period of time is, Quinn has to admit, more than a little unnerving.

Quinn leads Morgan up the short forest track to the stone’s perimetre, and then right, following its perimetre, in its shadow. It is a wet autumn day, and rain is dripping from the very top edge of the monolith as well as from the conifers that grow right up beside it. The rain makes a constant white hiss, deadening other sounds.

‘There’s a weak antimemetic clouding effect surrounding it,’ Quinn explains as she picks her way along the track ahead of Morgan. ‘To most people it’s effectively invisible. You’ve hiked up to the top of some of these other hills, I’m sure. You should have seen it clearly from up there as well, but you looked straight past it. That’s normal. There’s a related effect that removes people’s memories after they’ve visited the stone. That effect is much stronger. It’ll cut right through your mnestic drug regimen, and mine.’

‘So we’ll forget all about this?’ Morgan asks.

Quinn holds up a battered little notebook and a severely chewed blue ballpoint. Morgan understands; she is carrying a notebook and pen as well. Information suppression is a complicated spectrum. Sometimes a written note is the only thing that will make it out of a zone that suppresses memories, electronic data, radio signals and even audible sound. Alongside the mandatory Organisation-issue ‘brickphone,’ many Antimemetics Division operatives habitually carry some combination of an instant camera, a mechanical tape-driven dictation machine, a notebook, a walkie-talkie …

Not that Morgan was expecting to need anything today.

‘Of course,’ Quinn continues, ‘one side effect of the clouding is that I don’t exactly remember the way. I suppose we could set up signposts, but somehow it never gets done … Not because of antimemetic effects, you understand, just plain laziness … Ah, this looks like the way up.’

They come to a passage in the side of the stone. In fact it is not a passage but a tremendously deep groove, cut all the way from the top of the monolith to its base, a slot with a thin line of overcast sky visible overhead and steps leading up.

At the bottom of the steps, Quinn turns aside and mutters some words. It’s not clear to Morgan what she is saying, or to whom she is saying them. Morgan doesn’t know that she has a follower. But U-4987 cannot enter the area of effect of the stone. It won’t disconnect from her, not that easily, but it cannot follow Quinn up the steps. So, it needs a little reassurance.

Then Quinn begins to climb, and Morgan follows. They climb in silence for some minutes. Morgan stops a few times to write down a note or two, hunching over to shield her notebook from the drizzle. Then she hurries to catch up with Quinn, who maintains a steady, indifferent pace.

Sometime after Morgan has lost count of the steps, the groove makes a ninety-degree turn to the left and continues to ascend. Quinn stops here, above Morgan, and turns to quiz her.

‘What do you have so far?’

‘What is this place?’ Morgan asks.

‘You tell me.’

‘Uhm.’ Morgan hesitates for a moment, uncertain where this is going. She checks her notes. ‘Uhm, well. Geologically speaking, this stone is an alien. At first I thought there could have been a mountain on this spot that

was excavated into this shape by human hands. But the rock itself is wrong. It's different from the mountains and hills near here. Which means it must have been excavated elsewhere, maybe carved there, and moved here.'

Quinn says nothing, but her demeanour seems to indicate that Morgan is on the right track.

'Which isn't possible,' Morgan continues. 'This is a single stone. Judging from its dimensions and density, it must mass north of three million tons. And that can't be done. Human civilisation can't move objects of this size. Not in a single piece. The technology doesn't exist.'

'Correct.'

'So how did it get here?'

'Good question.'

Morgan doesn't have the answer to the question. She waits for Quinn to supply it.

But Quinn does not. 'What else?'

'… It's been engraved,' Morgan says, indicating the walls of the stepped passage. 'Using tools. And I noticed the exterior walls are the same. There's a lot of weathering, but here and there between the biological crud there's this very clear, regular pattern. Right here, see? Tiny vertical rectangles. Like a … block cursor on an old computer terminal.'

'Or a tombstone in typography,' Quinn suggests.

Morgan blinks. '… Yes. It's a uniform pattern. Very detailed work, which would require good tools even by modern standards. I think this pattern is supposed to cover the entire exterior of the stone. And if that's the case, the blocks are so minuscule and the stone is so large that there must have originally been millions of them.'

'Correct,' Quinn says again. 'Anything else?'

Morgan thinks for a minute. She stares up into the rain, reflecting on the atmosphere that the stone, or sculpture as she supposes it would be better described, projects. Loneliness, quiet, desolation, awe … intimidation. And

some fear. Although, with that intimidating, fearful atmosphere, there's no sensation of danger. No threat.

'"We considered ourselves to be a powerful culture,"' she says aloud.

Quinn hears this, but asks no follow-up question. Apparently satisfied, she turns and continues climbing the steps, and Morgan follows.

The passage makes several more turns, carving out an erratic, squared squiggle. Morgan takes no further notes. Her knees are about ready to explode by the time they reach the top.

They emerge, blinking at the light, on a wet, windswept, slightly slanted plateau. There are more of the tiny tombstone indentations underfoot. The edges of the monolith are some distance away but they are not marked; the dark grey surface just ends at a straight line not far out, and the horizon itself is below it, not visible. This gives Morgan some vertigo, particularly since the surface tilts toward one corner, and the engraved basalt underfoot is slick, wet and getting wetter.

There is a small cluster of Organisation scientific equipment up here, chunky weatherproof units stacked up under a canopy. There is a table, with a rugged, beaten-up computer terminal, switched off. Farther away is a diesel generator.

Quinn ignores the equipment and paces off in a different direction, facing away from Morgan and out at the sky, playing with her cigarette lighter, although not actually lighting anything. The lighter is actually a tiny propane burner intended for lighting stoves, given to her by her mother before she died. Quinn no longer remembers this.

Morgan waits for a while, arms folded for warmth, gradually getting wetter. She doesn't seek cover under the canopy, because Quinn hasn't. She senses that something is about to happen. Quinn is normally quite poised and difficult to read, but she looks apprehensive; upset, even. Focused intently on the lighter flame, Quinn seems to be unable to look her in the eye, as if she doesn't want to push through with the next part of whatever this is actually supposed to be. Orientation? Initiation? Hazing?

What was that about getting to the point?

'It's a memorial,' Morgan says.

'Hhn.' Quinn snaps the lighter shut and pockets it, moderately impressed. Only moderately, though. 'That's right. Of course, I practically told you that, when I mentioned tombstones –'

'How many Antimemetics Wars have there been?'

That gets her. ‘So much for slow-burning theatrics. Someone told you? You read the entry?’

Morgan looks at her shoes. ‘Uhm. No. Really, I’ve never seen this place before. I was just guessing.’

‘You look embarrassed,’ Quinn says. ‘You’re embarrassed that you hit the right answer thirty minutes before I was expecting you to. You think you’ve shown me up. Right? Oli. Look at me.’

She looks.

‘Keep operating at that level. Don’t slow down for my benefit, or anyone’s. I hire people who don’t think the way I think. My background’s in psychology. That’s why I hire botanists. And set theorists. And Egyptologists.’ She gestures at Morgan. ‘People with alternate perspectives. People who can take problems the rest of us have been hammering on for ten years and see straight through them.’

‘Will you tell me why we’re here?’ Morgan asks, for what she hopes will be the final time.

■

‘The problem,’ Quinn says, ‘is that every single person in the world with reliable access to high-grade mnestic medication works for me, here. And the Division is pitifully understaffed. There are one hundred and forty of us, including you and me, and one hundred and forty pairs of eyes is not enough. We cannot look at enough of the world at once. There is an appallingly large percentage of the world that no human has ever *properly* looked at. This is unbearably limiting to all forms of antimemetic research. Antimemetic history, antimemetic paleontology, antimemetic cosmology … These disciplines, all of them, barely exist. They are *nowhere.*

‘Nevertheless, we have seen this culture’s cities. One or two still exist. Pure dumb luck is how we found them. A Division researcher visits the U-9010 complex in Nevada, drives back across the Mojave while still on the dose … sees something on the horizon. That sort of thing. The cities are physically ruined, and there are heavy antimemetic effects shrouding them that make them nearly impossible to study, even for us. Large, simple things, like this stone, survived better, but even so … We think this stone was one of the last things they built before they died out.

‘They were human beings. They were probably significantly more technologically advanced than we are. They existed thousands of years ago; perhaps tens of thousands, we can’t know for sure. It’s difficult to determine what really happened to them because their entire cultural memeplex was lethally irradiated. Their core cultural concepts, the things they created, and stood for, and valued highly, can never be known or propagated again.

‘We think an idea stole into their culture that they did not have adaptations to defend against. A Category Epsilon idea complex. They may have fought it. But, ultimately, their culture is buried beneath that idea.’

Quinn pauses, letting the rain patter for a significant moment.

‘Millions of people died,’ Morgan says.

Quinn says nothing.

‘And we forgot about this?’ Morgan asks. ‘The rest of us. The fraction of the fraction, who survived the War, and became modern humanity. You and me and everybody. We, what, looked away? And walked away, and “moved on”?’

‘Yes.’

Morgan staggers, vertigo swelling up and briefly getting the better of her. ‘Millions of people died. And we just forgot. Is that what you wanted to show me? You want me to write that down?’

‘Yes,’ Quinn says. ‘Yes. Write this down. You’re learning two things today, and this is the first. Humans can forget anything. It’s okay to forget some things, because we are mortal and finite. But some things *we have to remember*. It’s important that we remember. Write something that will make you remember.’

Morgan nods. It’s raining too heavily, so she retreats under the canopy and uses the table. Even so, a few raindrops spatter her notes. She writes intently and rapidly, for some time. What she writes is rushed and unrefined, with large parts crossed out. She wonders how she’ll react when she reads it for the first time.

After a while, Quinn joins her under the canopy.

Morgan, staring at her notes, asks Quinn, as if she doesn’t already know the answer: ‘And the second thing?’

Quinn says:

‘It is possible that their culture had an equivalent to the Organisation. It may even have had an Antimemetics Division. If they did, their Organisation, and their Antimemetics Division, failed them.

‘It’s a big reality. It’s a huge Organisation, much bigger than you’re cleared to know. There’s a lot of Cat. Epsilons, and a lot of war-gamed scenarios where those Cat. Epsilons break containment and the orbital contingencies fail and an eye-watering number of people end up dead. And most of those Epsilons are handled by other divisions, on other continents. So, maybe the end of the world will be some other division’s problem. And yes, a big part of the job we hired you for is basic research. Lab work, as safe as it gets. And yes, it’s been thousands of years, and it may be thousands of years more.

‘But maybe it won’t. And maybe it will be our problem.

‘Organisation staff join Antimemetics for a lot of reasons, and one of those reasons is that they perceive the work to be easier. Safer. Lower-stakes. But an idea can end a world. An idea is alive. It can mutate, it can replicate, it can predate on other ideas … and it can hide. And – people deserve to be safe. This is the purpose of the Organisation. It’s what we are for. Research, yes, Unknown science, because that *helps,* but ultimately we are here to keep everybody *safe.* Not just from scalpel monsters and optically communicable fasciitis and the Cult of the Holocene Impactor. From everything!’

Quinn is amped up. She realises it at the same instant that Morgan notices it. Her usual cold facade has slipped, and she has betrayed some earnest motivation. She takes a second, cools off.

‘To answer your original question,’ she says, ‘there has been one Antimemetics War that we know of. Potentially others that we don’t know of. And there is, undoubtedly, one to come.’

Morgan says nothing. She looks dismayed, broken. She’s right to be, and Quinn is familiar with the reaction. This is, indeed, part of every new Antimemetics Division operative’s orientation. The magnitude of responsibility can be hard to handle. It’s meant to be.

‘Welcome to the Antimemetics Division,’ Quinn says. ‘This is your first day.’

■

Morgan writes for some time longer. Quinn waits, silently. The rain doesn’t let up.

‘But what was it?’ Morgan asks. ‘What was the idea?’

‘U-9429-B,’ Quinn says. ‘We isolated the memeplex itself in the seventies. We have the descriptor on ice in a Vegas room, basement level two. It’s harmless now, Cat. 1. It’s so culturally alien to modern humans as to be nearly incoherent. Think like Egyptian hieroglyphs. I’ll show you another day.’

‘Are you saying it couldn’t come back?’

‘In that form, it’s highly unlikely. Our culture just isn’t shaped like that anymore.’

Morgan stares at her notes. She’s drawn a sigil at the bottom, something Quinn can’t immediately identify.

‘I study ancient cultures,’ Morgan says, distantly. ‘I can read hieroglyphs. Some of them.’

The sigil isn’t a hieroglyph, as far as Quinn can tell. But then, Quinn isn’t a specialist. She hires specialists. That’s the whole point …

‘What does it look like?’ Morgan asks.

‘U-9429-B?’

‘Yes.’

An idea doesn’t look like anything, Quinn goes to say, but stops herself. Morgan doesn’t know it, but in the database entry for U-9429-B there are complex plots, visualisations of what it looks like as a constellation in memetic space. Now that she thinks about it, U-9429-B has numerous aspects. Symmetries, even.

‘Ugly,’ she says. ‘Fascinating,’ she adds. ‘Why?’

Morgan is staring into the distance, now.

Quinn follows her gaze. There’s nothing out there. Just overcast sky and rain.

And after a few seconds, Quinn’s gut instinct kicks her, as it has many times before, hard enough to make her jump. Something is wrong here. A piece is missing from the scene.

She turns back to Morgan. ‘Oli, why?’

Morgan points at something, far away in the sky. Her breathing is becoming heavier.

Quinn sees nothing. ‘What do you see? Under heavy mnestic doses, some people say they see ghosts here. We even have some supposed interview logs. Personally, I think their veracity is dubious …’

‘Um. It doesn’t look like a ghost. It looks like a … a half-starved … kaiju. A monster. A pillar made of spiders. It’s taller than this stone. At least twice as tall. It’s coming here. Is this normal?’

‘No.’ Quinn is already racing through the checklist.

‘What is it?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘This isn’t part of the hazing?’

‘No. I will never lie to you, Oli. I swear.’ An antimemetically cloaked entity as monstrous as Morgan’s description has a zero percent chance of being benign. They need support. Quinn finds that her phone has no signal. Morgan’s will be the same. The only way to get a message out of here is with a written note. A paper airplane, thrown off the top into the woods?

‘It’s bending down. I think it’s looking at me,’ Morgan says, watching a space in the air descend. There isn’t even a hole in the rain that Quinn can perceive. ‘Its head is gigantic, it has to be ten metres wide. It has … graspers and arthropod legs all over it. Dozens of eyes. Some of them are blinded. There’s someone riding it.’

‘What? Describe the rider.’

‘Caucasian male, twenties, skinny. Jeans, trainers, dirty brown hair, needs a haircut. He’s been shot. He’s bleeding out all over but he doesn’t seem to notice. In the liver, and again in the throat, just above the clavicle. He’s smiling.’

Quinn spends a second wondering whether the gunshot wounds are intentionally creepy detailing, or whether the man is genuinely using some kind of advanced antimemetic power to ignore a mortal wound. And, if the latter, how, and how he originally sustained it. But more urgent questions are afoot. ‘He sees you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Does he see me? Hear me?’

Morgan is transfixed and is starting to look genuinely frightened. ‘He wants to know who I’m talking to.’

‘Don’t tell him. He doesn’t get information about us, understand?’ Quinn pulls her walkie-talkie from her waist, sets it to broadcast an emergency beacon, turns and hurls it overarm as far as she possibly can, in the direction of the Wyeleigh main building. With luck, it’ll land intact in the forest, outside the suppression zone cast by U-9429, summoning a Hazardous Response Team. ‘Ask who he is.’

Morgan is standing very still, with her arms clamped rigidly at her side. ‘Who are you? … He says … he says he’s nearly finished. He says he’s going to kill me.’

‘Like hell. Oli, listen to me. We’re running for it. Back down the steps. If we can get to the perimetre of the stone it’ll flush our memories.’

‘I can’t move.’

Quinn hauls on one of Morgan’s arms. She can’t be moved. ‘Put one foot in front of the other!’

‘It’s got ahold of me.’ Morgan is goggle-eyed and starting to hyperventilate.

Quinn disengages and surveys the situation. She can’t see or touch any grasping spider legs, or the monstrous face that Morgan can’t look away from, or the rider. But she believes Morgan that they’re there, real for some value of ‘real.’ She claps one hand to her side; but of course she isn’t carrying her sidearm, because U-9429 is a Cat. 1 Unknown, and this is home territory, and why would she be? Not that it even makes a difference when this mythical rider is able to laugh off gunshot wounds. There aren’t enough options in front of her. She very badly wants to swear, and bites down hard on her tongue.

Morgan screams.

‘Oli!’ Quinn shouts. ‘Don’t look at it. Look at me.’

‘I can’t.’

‘You’re stronger than this.’

‘I’m not,’ Morgan cries.

‘You’re the best we have,’ Quinn says. ‘I’m not making that up. You saw this thing when nobody else could. That makes you smarter and stronger. You can fight it. Concentrate!’

‘He hates us so much,’ Morgan says. ‘I can’t think through it. I can’t see. Please. Please don’t.’

Quinn circles behind Morgan, plants one hand on her shoulder for stability, and punches her behind the ear. Morgan sags in place, then falls forward to her knees. Quinn is just about able to catch her before her skull connects with the ground.

But she didn’t hit her hard enough. Morgan is unconscious only for a second. She struggles as she comes back. It’s like she’s waking from a nightmare into another nightmare. She clutches at Quinn’s hand. She can’t scream. Her heart stops.

Quinn rolls her over and administers CPR, but without equipment there's very little chance of her restarting Morgan's heart.

Nobody's coming. She didn't throw the walkie-talkie far enough.

It's almost ten minutes before she gives up.

■

And then Quinn is collapsed against the wall of the passage, on the next-to-last step, about to leave U-9429's field of influence, trying to figure out what in the *fuck* she can possibly write to herself.

It's back. It's here. It never died. We just couldn't see it. Has it mutated?

Morgan could see it. All she did was look at it and it killed her. She was as good as any of us. She was as capable as she was ever going to be and she wasn't good enough. How do you fight an antimemetic monster that only eats the best antimemeticists?

You … you could try to build some kind of countermeme. But you'd need to be shielded while you worked on it. You'd need a hermetically sealed, self-sustaining lab as big as an arcology. Like the ones Ed Hix used to build. Like … the one under the Wyeleigh labs. Basement level 30.

God. How long have we been fighting this thing?

There's a rustling behind her. She turns to look. Far away up the steps, there he is, the rider Morgan described. A scrawny young man with a hostile frown and, yes, two steadily oozing gunshot wounds. His shoes are soaked in blood.

He calls out, 'Marie Quinn! I owe you for the lake.'

Quinn stands up. She doesn't know what lake he's talking about. But she says nothing.

The rider gestures. Blue and brown and black spiders of all sizes cascade around the corner, flooding the passageway up to his knees, pouring over his shoulders, tumbling down toward Quinn. They make a strange, organic rustling as they pour, like wet leaves. There must be millions of them. The spiders would probably be much more effective if she was at all afraid of them.

It's too bad. She's just learned a great deal about this entity; that they have history together, and that it personally dislikes her, and that it apparently has a humanoid mouthpiece … and a poor imagination. But she

has only a second before the cascade of arachnids overcomes her, and that's not enough time to even write a single word. Morgan's death, then, was for nothing.

She steps backward, over the threshold.

■

The rain is finally easing off. Quinn lights a cigarette and heads back to the main building. It's almost time for her weekly inspection of U-2200.

2

Where Have You Been All My Life

Who the *fuck* infiltrates a senior Organisation official's home, while they're home?

Marie Quinn lives deep in the forest, a long drive from the nearest major city and a long drive in the opposite direction from Wyeleigh. It's late, last thing, and she's reading in bed when she hears the muffled, unmistakable click of her front door being unlocked. She looks up, and stares blankly at the wall for a second while listening to soft footsteps moving into the hallway.

She marks her place and reaches for her Organisation-issued phone. She has no permanent security staff at home – the Division is understaffed and trained operatives are in much more serious need at Wyeleigh proper – but the building and grounds have beefy electronic countermeasures. They, she discovers, have all been disabled, along with the sensors and cameras. She was not notified that this had happened. Whoever did it had a valid code.

Who, though?

The Organisation has enemies. True, the list of credible, motivated enemies is short, and the list of groups stupid enough to try to kill or capture someone at her level is shorter. But it's far from empty, and it's not actually so hard a feat; not too many Organisation staff below the C-level have the privilege of travelling by motorcade. The real trick, the impossible trick, is to avoid unholy retaliation. But what if you really think you can? What if you've decided it's worth it?

Quinn triggers the silent alarm. Ten minutes to the response team. Maybe eight, but realistically ten. Either figure is an eternity. She's on her own.

She rolls out of bed, tucks a few pillows in her place, and casts around, hopelessly, for a weapon. Her sidearm is in the safe under the stairs and

there are knives, good ones, in the kitchen. She can't get to them. She is surrounded by soft furnishings. She clenches her fists, mouthing profanity.

She opens a seldom-used lower drawer. She throws a few bundles of yarn aside, and pulls out a steel knitting needle.

Then she moves silently to her bedroom door, gripping the needle in her right fist, thumb on the knob. The 'sharp' end of the needle is pitifully blunt but with a suitable amount of aggression she bets she can drive it through, for example, someone's trachea.

Now she listens, and thinks. This door, her bedroom door, can't be opened silently. It creaks like hell, so if she goes through it she'll have to be ready to draw attention. There's an attic, but access is out there on the landing and, again, can't be operated silently. There's no alternate route to ground level other than jumping from the window, and she assumes that someone is covering it. Even if she landed in the bushes alive, she'd still have to break the perimetre with a sprained ankle.

A creaking. This damned house. Someone is coming up the stairs, making no effort to be quiet about it. A soft tread, though. As if they removed their shoes. Just one of them? That barely makes sense.

It's too late for the rest of the logic. The door's opening. It seems like the man's trying to say something as he comes in, but he only gets as far as 'I – *whulp,*' and it's done. He's flat on his face, cheek pressed into deep cream carpet, with Quinn on his back pinning both his wrists with her knees. She glances back down the stairs for a second; there's no one there. She prods him in his other cheek with the tip of the knitting needle. 'You speak or move, I'll put a hole in your throat,' she hisses. She glances at the windows, checks the stairs again, listens intently. There's no sound. There's nothing to be seen.

The man is fifty, and lanky. He wears an expensive dark suit, tailored to his build. He has angular features, thick, greying hair and rimless spectacles, now quite possibly bent out of shape by their sudden impact with the floor. He wears discreet platinum jewelry: a wristwatch, cufflinks and a ring.

The two of them halt like that, a tableau. He makes no attempt to move, although he does look askance at Quinn, as best he can given his dislodged glasses.

Quinn asks, 'Where are the others?'

'It's just me, Marie,' he answers.

‘Who are you?’

He says nothing for a moment, but his expression slowly, subtly drops. ‘I, ah. Well. Well, it really happened, didn’t it? I always wondered.’

‘Who are you?’

‘There is a monster that follows you around and eats your memories,’ the man says. ‘U-4987. You drip-feed it inconsequential trivia so it doesn’t go after anything important. You watch quiz shows. The book you were reading just now. On your nightstand. It’s a trivia book. Right?’

Quinn says nothing to confirm or deny this, although it is true. At feeding time the entity manifests like a bright gold-white spot in the corner of her eye. It’s gone now.

She’s already put the rest of it together. It is all mind-bogglingly, insultingly obvious.

The man goes on, ‘We call it “Sunshine.”’

Fighting to keep the note of dismay out of her voice, she asks, ‘What’s your name?’

‘Adam,’ he says. ‘Adam Quinn.’

■

Obviously, she has the man detained.

She instructs her people to interrogate him – lightly – and to run deep background research on every word he utters, while for her part she stands far back from the investigation to avoid contamination. She resists the urge to interfere, particularly to visit ‘Adam’ and personally demand answers. She goes to her office, curls up on the couch there and tries to catch some sleep, but doesn’t succeed in any real sense.

Seven hours later Geoff Ives knocks on her office door, bringing a three-centimetre-thick block of printouts and a paralysingly strong cup of coffee. Quinn takes the drink first, accepting it as a kind of authentication step before letting the man in. She moves back to the couch and sits hunched over the drink for warmth, inhaling its fumes.

Ives settles heavily into a chair opposite the couch. ‘They, uh,’ he says, ‘reckoned I should be the one to present their results. Even though I didn’t research one line of it. “Cause you and I “get along.” Their words. Personally, I don’t see it.’

Quinn stays focused on the coffee. ‘Who is he?’

Ives opens the first page of the report and takes a breath. ‘“Adam Benjamin Quinn. Born the twenty-seventh of February 1962 in Holme, Derbyshire, to Margaret Edith Quinn, née Wachs’ – doubt I’m pronouncing that correctly – ‘and Patrick John Quinn, both now deceased. No siblings. Attended Holme Church of England Primary School, Clapbrook All Saints Secondary. Demonstrated great musical acuity from an early age. By age sixteen he had begun to be recognised as one of the most gifted classical violinists of his generation. Attended the Royal College of –”’

‘Skip,’ Quinn says. ‘Skip, skip.’

Ives turns a few pages, looking for something more directly relevant to Quinn’s interests. He quotes: ‘“After sustaining a minor injury whilst on a concert tour in the north-west of England, he encountered what the Organisation now designates as Unknown 8051, which had infested a wing of the hospital where he received treatment.” That’s the Digit Thief. “His attempt to alert authorities to the infestation’s presence was intercepted by an Organisation listening station. Operative Marie A. Sheridan, then a field operative based in –”’

‘Skip. Summarise.’

Ives skips to the end. ‘Quote: “They subsequently became romantically involved.” Unquote.’ He shrugs lightly, and closes the report and puts it aside.

There is a heavy pause.

‘I remember acquiring U-8051,’ Quinn says. ‘There was no one else there.’ It’s difficult to say who, if anybody, she’s trying to convince.

‘He is your husband,’ Ives says. ‘Every word checks out. There is limitless physical evidence. In the report I’ve seen school certificates, dental records, gas bills, holiday photos.’ He chooses not to add *wedding photos*. He could swear there was a wedding photograph on Quinn’s desk at one point, but he doesn’t see it.

‘And that’s just the physical evidence,’ he goes on. ‘We *know* him. Half the Division senior staff has met him socially, including me. Barbecues and the like. Partners are invited along. Right?’ He leans forward and adds, in a low voice, ‘More to the point, it doesn’t make sense to fabricate such an extensive physical backstory *and* backfill everybody’s memories except for yours. And be discovered instantly? Even if there was something in the

world that *could* do a thing like that, which isn't completely impossible, there's no threat model that leads to it.

'He's real. Do you believe that he's real, Marie? I want us to be on the same page on this one. We're not filing this man away forever under a four-digit number. You adhered to protocol today, and I respect that, but the bottom line is that U-4987 got hungry.'

Quinn nods. The assessment matches her own, pieced together overnight from gut reactions and analysis of the plain facts.

Where else did her name come from? She wasn't born 'Quinn.' But she had to get independent verification.

Ives says, 'One other thing. He was carrying this. It was in his glasses case.' From his pocket, he takes out an autoinjector pen: a chunky white cylinder with a luminous orange vial mounted inside it and a cap concealing a needle. He passes it to Quinn.

She inspects it. The pen is generic, with no visible branding, but she recognises the design. It is UO-made. The vial is unmarked except for a bold black *Z*.

Ives says, 'He knows exactly what it is. And how to use it. He says you gave it to him. For emergencies.'

'… Well, that confirms it,' Quinn murmurs. 'I trusted him. My God.'

'Director,' Ives says. There is a note of carefully restrained anger.

Quinn looks over her glasses at him. 'Say what you need to say.'

'A civilian can't have this,' Ives says. 'This substance is extremely strictly controlled and extremely dangerous. There have been multiple proposals to destroy the entire stockpile. For excellent reasons.'

She grimaces, but acknowledges the point. 'After we're through here, I'll return it to containment.'

This placates him. Somewhat. 'With respect, ma'am: What were you thinking?'

'I don't know what I was thinking,' Quinn snaps. 'I'm not her anymore! I don't know who he is! Has this' – she gestures at her head – 'happened before?'

'To our knowledge, no.'

'No, of course not. Could it happen again?'

Ives shrugs. 'You would know better than anyone.'

'I have U-4987 trained to follow me at my heel. I feed it according to a strict regimen. It eats only the memories I say it's okay to eat. A rapidly

progressive, universally fatal memory parasite made chronic and then domesticated. And now, what, it suddenly breaks training? That adds up?'

'If you say it doesn't add up, it doesn't add up,' Ives says, cautiously. 'You've lived with it, in peace, for a long time. But speaking as a field operative, trusting an Unknown to behave predictably is a phenomenal way to get written off.'

Quinn has waited long enough, and takes a long pull from the coffee. She stares into the coiling steam, as if trying to see the future. 'But who is he?' she asks again. 'At this point, you know him better than I do. What's he like? Do you like him?'

Ives grimaces extravagantly. This is the great-grandmother of all loaded questions.

Quinn looks him in the eye and says, 'Tell me your personal impression of Adam Quinn. Direct order.'

'… He's a nice enough guy.'

'"Nice enough"?'

Ives clicks his tongue. 'I don't like him,' he admits. 'Personally. All that much. We're civil. But he will always be a little bit too smug, and a little bit too clever. He just … grates. Would I leave someone in a cell for that? No.'

'Do I like him?'

'You –' Ives begins, then stops. He looks away. And over time, a soft smile develops on his face, one that Quinn doesn't recall ever seeing before, not in a working relationship going back years. 'Yeah,' he says. 'Yeah. He's the one.'

■

Quinn is reading the report alone, now. The report details the U-8051 acquisition, and Adam Quinn's role in it, in the most sterile, disinterested terms conceivable. She learns nothing at all from it about his personality, and reading it feels like dying.

She remembers acquiring U-8051. She remembers that there was no one there.

She remembers incorrectly.

■

There's another conglomeration of severed fingers in the last room, coating the room's interior like the innards of an exploded elephant. Parts of the sprawl are feeling their way, like mold, into a medical cabinet and the rest is splayed over a fetal shape on a medical gurney. The mass reacts sharply to the new light as Adam Quinn opens the door, rearing up and angling parts of itself toward him. He reels backward and pulls the door closed just in time; there is a heavy, fleshy *thump* as the mass hits the door from the far side. The door holds.

Quinn trips on his own foot and slumps against the far wall. The shape on the gurney was a coiled-up human. Not a corpse, but a living human with one wide-open eye whose whole body was being slowly consumed and processed into more fingers. They were growing out of his throat. Quinn didn't see this. He thinks he saw it, but he knows he couldn't have.

And that's it. Quinn casts around the corridor. Every other door he's tried is blocked or locked. The place is belowground, so no windows. No navigable ventilation.

There are two more gunshots up at the far end of the corridor, ear-splitting in the enclosed space and echoing for many seconds. Sheridan rounds the corner at a dead run, gun in hand, and reaches him quickly. 'Find a way out?' she asks, pointlessly. She can read Quinn's expression. He's found nothing good.

'This place is infested,' Quinn says. 'Every room, all the stairwells … This is absurd.'

At the far end of the corridor, the main mass heaves itself around the corner. From this distance, it looks like an ambulatory eight-ton pile of moldy mashed potato and fat, wiggling maggots. There are toes in there as well as fingers, and small teeth, and bits of bone. It has twenty bullet holes in it, and blood is flowing from all of them, but if it has vital organs they must be elsewhere in the building because none of the wounds have slowed it down or otherwise altered its slow, methodical homing behaviour. It smells powerfully and creatively disgusting, like concentrated medical waste.

It lurches forward in intermittent phases, coating the walls and floor with scarlet ooze as it moves. It'll be on them in about half a minute, squashing them against the end of the corridor and then pulling them into the mess to be remade.

'I think we're done,' Quinn quavers. 'Thanks for trying.'

Sheridan, for her part, just stands there, gun lowered, watching the thing come. It moves slowly, like a steamroller. It fills the corridor almost to the ceiling.

She has two bullets left and she's considering where to spend them. Shooting the mass itself is like shooting pudding. She'd kill for a grenade. Even a fire axe would be something. She might not be able to stop the thing, but she could at least make herself known with a fire axe. She could make it feel some *regret.*

'There are worse fates, I guess,' Quinn goes on, finding himself unable to stop talking, 'than being digitised by that thing, but not all that many.'

Sheridan glances in his direction, apparently paying him direct attention for the first time since they met, sixty crowded minutes ago. She says, 'Riser cupboard.'

'What?'

She pushes Quinn aside. There's a white-painted wall behind him. There is a long vertical seam separating the wall into two floor-to-ceiling panels, and a lock just beside the seam. Sheridan spends a moment choosing the right part of the lock to shoot, and shoots it out. Both panels open to reveal a shallow, dusty, metal-edged space, like an elevator shaft with no elevator, allowing filthy pipes and cables to pass vertically between floors. She looks up. There's just enough room to admit a person.

'Can you climb?' she asks Quinn. Without waiting for a response, she sheds her suit jacket, sticks a torch between her teeth, and hauls herself up into the darkness. After a brief moment of scuffling, there's another gunshot: the riser cupboard door on the next floor up.

'No,' Quinn finally manages. 'No, I can't climb!' The mass is almost on him. He's transfixed by its motion, its all-too-familiar grasping behaviour.

'I figured,' Sheridan calls down. A hand descends, a human one with the conventional number of fingers. 'It's clear up here. Come on, I'm braced. Mind this lip here, it's metal. Come on!'

Quinn keeps his own jacket on and buttoned; it's the only part of the situation over which he still has firm control. He has to jump to catch hold of Sheridan's hand, and just as he jumps, the main mass lunges for him, crossing the last few metres in a rush and catching hold of him by one foot.

He sees himself die.

His sweating hand immediately starts to slip out of Sheridan's. She braces her other arm and hauls him up fifteen or thirty centimetres with an

angry grunt, then releases his hand for a split second and reaches down like a flash to take firmer hold of his wrist. She keeps pulling. The mass closes around Quinn's foot like aggressive, proactive quicksand. He yelps and kicks at it with his other foot until it finally pries his shoe loose. The mass retreats for a second, taking a moment to realise that its prize is not living flesh, but by that time Sheridan has hauled Quinn up another half metre and Quinn has started pushing himself upward off the pipework with his feet. The mass lunges again, but falls short, and seems too unintelligent to climb after them. It sloshes around, probing its surroundings, perplexed by the shoe.

Sheridan hauls Quinn over the lip into the next corridor. He scrapes his ribs badly and arrives crawling, eyes watering. He doesn't die. He can still see himself dying. He stays on all fours for a significant amount of time, processing what just happened.

'Fuck!'

Sheridan is already standing, and apparently not even significantly exerted. 'We need to get to the roof. I might be able to get a signal out from there.'

'You're at the gym pretty often?' Quinn pants, sitting back. 'You train for nonsense like this?'

'Yeah.'

'That's wonderful,' Quinn says, 'because I play the violin. It's not quite as physically demanding, as careers go. When you said you were a health inspector, that was an enormous lie, wasn't it?'

Sheridan ignores the question, out of habit, and waits impassively for the man to cool.

'This is asinine,' Quinn declares. 'This is brain damage.' His skin crawls, and grotesque visions flood through his brain. Eventually he recovers his breath and gets to his feet. He stands lopsided, so he takes his other shoe off and throws it back down the riser for symmetry.

'We need to get to the roof,' Sheridan says again.

Quinn blinks a long blink, then focuses on something around the corner, something on the wall that Sheridan can't see from where she's standing. 'Yes. One second.' He goes to it – it's a red panel – and pulls something down. 'Here, you were having no luck with the gun. Try this.'

It's a fire axe.

■

He stepped on a rusty nail backstage after the show, and came to the hospital for a tetanus injection. While waiting, he slowly realised that more than half of the people waiting with him were clutching partially or entirely severed fingers. Bandsaw accidents; hands caught in car doors; hands trapped in door hinges; hands crushed in machinery; every one of them unrelated. There was an epidemic of physical injury, which should have been impossible, and when he tried to bring it up with the medical staff they didn't seem to understand what he was saying. It was like a nightmare. A very personal nightmare, to Quinn, nightmarish in its similarity to real nightmares he had from time to time, about losing the use of his own fingers.

Then he saw one of them escape. He followed it as it wriggled away down a long corridor to a far corner of the hospital, to an ajar door that nobody in the hospital seemed to be able to perceive except for him, and into a different building where there were no people at all, just hundreds and hundreds of wriggling, exploring, slowly reproducing and lengthening fingers.

He slammed the door and tried and failed to get someone, anyone, staff or patient, to see what he was seeing. He found a pay-phone and dialed emergency services and ordered off the menu, asking for emergency industrial-scale pest control or hazardous containment or psychic support or *something.*

And there was a long pause, and he was connected to what was either a very measured, dispassionate human or an impressively articulate robot operator. It told him to wait by the phone; an associate would be with him shortly. Marie Sheridan arrived in person, slightly less than fifteen minutes later.

He showed her the door. They went a few paces inside, Sheridan crouching and aiming some kind of scanner at the finger worms. Behind them, something reached out and gently pushed the door closed with a *click.* They turned, and saw what it was, and ran.

■

Sheridan hacks her way through the last of the flesh-clogged stairwell. They're almost at the roof. This part of the distributed infestation doesn't seem to be mobile, although it is freakishly grabby.

Quinn stands three paces back from her, partly to avoid the backswing but mostly so he doesn't have to watch. It's butchery, and it's grisly, and Sheridan barely seems perturbed by it; she slices methodically until there are waterfalls of gore coming down the stairs and soaking her shoes and his socks, and she does it with the manner of someone trimming a hedgerow.

Whunch. Krunlch.

Quinn is shivering, and starting to crash. If he doesn't stay still right in the middle of the stairwell, the remaining fingers tug at his hair and sleeves. In another few minutes it may finally dawn on him that this is really happening. 'This is bonkers, this is nuts,' he says to himself, over and over.

'What was that word you used back there?' Sheridan asks, suddenly.

'Mmm?'

Whunch. 'Don't tune out. When the mass was coming down the hall. Did you say "digitised"?'

'… Um.' Quinn seems to change gear, and wake up. 'Yeah. Uh, but, in the old sense of the word –'

'"Digit" meaning "finger," so "digitised" meaning "turned into fingers." I just got it.' She's smiling, he can hear it. *Chlunk.* 'That's great.'

'I … Thank you?'

'What kind of violin music?'

'Uh. What kind would you like? Tonight's – last night's – Christ, *yesterday's* concert was Prokofiev's Violin Concerto No. 1. And a few other pieces, obviously, but that was the main course for me. That was where I got my teeth in.'

Sheridan stops hacking and turns around. She actually looks him in the eye. 'That piece is a nightmare.'

'It's a challenge,' Quinn admits, brightly.

'No, I mean it's chaotic. It's unlistenable.'

'I can play anything you like,' Quinn states.

Sheridan appears to spend a moment considering this possibility. 'Bach. You can play some Bach?'

'Of course. Just get me to a violin.'

Sheridan thinks for a moment longer. She nods, and goes back to hacking.

■

And they hit the roof, and Sheridan's radio finally works, and she calls everything in. She speaks in rapid keywords that Quinn can't quite follow, although he can pick out his own name and 'hazmat' and a repeated word that sounds to him like a brand of cassette tape: 'Memetix.'

It's very nearly dawn. This wing of the hospital is a few storeys shorter than its main body, so rows of bright-lit wards look down over the roof, while the roof looks out over two sprawling car parks and then greenery and roads and a faint, dull red where the Sun is due to come up. Sheridan quickly ascertains that there is no fire escape from here; the intended fire exit from the roof is the stairwell they just used to get up here, so they'll have to wait for a helicopter. Or, more likely and less romantically, a long ladder.

'Backup is coming,' Sheridan concludes. 'They have to come in from the next city over, so it could be a while. They'll have decontamination gear, antibiotics, blankets, tedious debriefing forms, you name it. But, most importantly, coffee.'

Quinn makes an inarticulate sound, the sound of one who could use the coffee, and after that, a drink. 'God, I have another concert *today,*' he says. He sits on the thick perimetre wall, rubs his eyes, rubs his sore feet, and begins to shut down.

'You'll be there,' Sheridan says. 'The nasty part is over. You did well for a civilian. I've seen far worse.'

'Worse than this?'

Sheridan says nothing.

'I'm sorry.' Quinn opens his eyes again. He gestures at the mayhem from which they just escaped, the fire door and everything it leads to. It's all still down there. 'You've seen worse than *this*?'

Sheridan, again, says nothing.

'What is this? What happened here?'

At first Sheridan doesn't answer this either. She walks away across the roof and spends an entire minute staring at the forthcoming Sun.

And then, surprising Quinn and slightly surprising even herself, she walks back to him and says:

'U-8051, which is the reference number we just assigned to this infestation, has an intrinsic property that makes it nearly impossible for

sapient organisms to perceive it. It's a form of camouflage. It's not invisible, it's a mental blocking effect. Information about it goes nowhere, it gets suppressed. People walk past this building every day of the week. They don't see what's blocking the windows. They walk past that door you saw, and don't realise it's standing open. It could have been here for decades. The researchers will get the whole story eventually.'

Quinn finds in this explanation something he halfway understands. 'So … living fnords?'

And this actually slows Sheridan down for a second. She gets that reference. She read those books when she was younger, years ago, before joining the Organisation. But she's *never* made the connection between fnords and the work she does. For as long as she's been working there, she hasn't even thought about it. The irony is intense enough to burn.

'Yeah,' she says.

'Except that you can see them,' Quinn says.

'I have specialist training,' Sheridan says, declining to mention her drug regimen.

'And I, also, can see them.'

'You seem to have a mild natural immunity to memory-clouding phenomena,' Sheridan explains. 'It's rare, but it happens. At a hospital this busy, someone like you was bound to stumble into this place sooner or later.' *And escape alive,* she adds, privately. 'But the point is … this infestation, Unknown 8051, is a snowflake. I don't just mean that it's special and unique. I mean: it's part of a *blizzard.*

'We've been collecting Unknowns for about as long as we've known what science is. When empiricism and the scientific method were first starting to take shape, we realised that there were phenomena in the world that actively defied reason. Violations, weirdnesses, defects. Inexplicable curios, creatures, people, places, events, ideas. So we formed a society and we started gathering them and studying them. The world was like some grand unbalanced equation, with known science on one side and all these Unknowns on the other.

'As time passed, the amount of known science grew and the number of Unknowns grew in lockstep. They grew more numerous and more creative and more frightening. And then something happened. Something I'm not cleared for, but that struck the fear of God into the people running the

Society at the time. And it stopped being a secretive academic pursuit. We had to get organised.

'We are researchers. Mostly. Still. Researchers with a global mandate, formidable resources, and … unimaginable responsibilities. We watch the blizzard. And we guard the little fire. We've been doing it for about two hundred years.'

Quinn's full attention is on her now. He feels tense and exposed here, vulnerable to extraordinary natural forces from which by rights he should be fleeing. But he's also fascinated. Sheridan has a faintly ethereal attitude to her. It's as if she's not standing on the same planet as everybody else.

She says, 'It's about fear. Fundamentally. People shouldn't have to be afraid. Of hunger, sickness, violence, injustice. But especially, people shouldn't have to be afraid of things like *that.*' She points. 'So that's what we do. We take care of it. So you can sleep at night.'

That's it. That's the moment, although Quinn won't realise it until years later.

'… So you're not with the FBI,' he says. 'This wouldn't be the right country, anyway.'

Sheridan wrinkles her nose. 'I hated watching that show. I had to stop in the end.'

'I don't believe I mentioned a show,' Quinn says, mischievously.

'They were doing everything wrong,' Sheridan says. A nerve has been touched. She paces irately. 'They didn't have enough people. They didn't trust each other. They didn't spend nearly enough time on paperwork. Paperwork saves lives. But most of all I hated the will-they-or-won't-they. It went on for *years.* It was forced, it was farcical.' She glares at Quinn. 'It doesn't take that long to know. You will or you won't. And then you do.'

Quinn reads her expression carefully. 'You do?'

'Yeah,' Sheridan says, smiling again. 'Yeah, I think you do.'

A distant rapid thudding noise slowly becomes apparent. Sheridan sees the source of the sound first and points. 'Backup's here. And it looks like we rated a helicopter after all.'

■

‘“They subsequently became romantically involved,”’ she mutters to herself.

Adam Quinn’s biography is contentless beyond this point. His life spent touring, playing, lecturing – and occasionally conducting, writing and composing – is documented in exhaustive, pointless detail. He withstands background checks and surveillance, and consistently demonstrates himself to represent zero risk of leak. He eventually receives the extremely low clearance level normally granted to long-term Organisation-external partners of Organisation staff.

They get married, and she takes his name, which she, reading, considers faintly unrealistic.

Sometime later, they try for a child, and fail. This page of the report, she stares at for a long time, feeling an eerie numbness spread through her. A numbness that should be something else, anything else. She should feel something, reading something like this, shouldn’t she? The topic of children is not mentioned anywhere else in the report.

■

Up until the end of the third round of questioning, Adam Quinn assumes good faith. He figures the repetition is a due diligence tic, a corporate procedural requirement. It’s only when they start over from ‘What’s your name?’ with a brand-new interviewer for the fourth time that he finally gets it: they don’t like him, and they don’t care what he thinks his name is. They’re trying to grind him down until he can’t think, until he’s just dust particles they can sift through for data.

He reacts badly to this realisation. He asks for his wife, and asks for his wife, and they ignore him, and they ignore him, and she persistently fails to appear, until it becomes a cold form of torture. The questions keep coming and nothing stops them, not answering truthfully, not *not* answering, not lying, not rambling off on tangents. They don’t stop until he begins falling asleep in the middle of his own sentences.

He wakes up in a standard Humanoid Containment Unit, a stackable one-bedroom apartment with holographic fake windows, impregnable walls and extensive discreet modifications for the security and monitoring of Unknown entities. This one is on the first basement level, but he can’t tell

that. The bright ‘light’ pouring in through the main living area window is authentic enough to tan.

He wakes up on the couch with a start, feeling creaky and dehydrated. He realises that he slept in his suit, and that his suit is creased. He hates that, that sensation of not looking his best, or at least presentable. That’s going to gnaw away at him until he can find, at minimum, a razor and a change of shirt.

What woke him was the heavy metallic *clack* of the door unlocking. He looks up, rubbing his eyes. It’s his wife. ‘Marie! Oh, my God.’ He leaps up and rushes over to meet her. She stops him a few paces short, with a gesture and a cold smile. And *that* hurts. It hurts more than anything.

So it really happened: U-4987, Sunshine, has bitten out the part of Marie that cared about him. She wasn’t absent because of some unrelated ε-level breach. She just chose to be elsewhere, indifferent.

So he doesn’t embrace her. He stands at a polite distance. ‘How are you feeling? Did you sleep?’

‘I’m fine.’

‘I can tell you’ve had your coffee. Have you eaten? Come on, I’ll make you something.’ The unit has a rudimentary kitchen area. He goes through and starts exploring the cupboards. ‘There must be something edible around here. Eggs and milk, at least. I’m ashamed to say I more or less fell asleep where I was standing when they put me in here, so I haven’t had a chance to scout. Or do you keep the place empty, and the food arrives through a slot in the wall?’

Marie begins, ‘Mr Quinn –’

Adam shoots her an unhappy look.

‘Okay,’ she says, ‘Adam. Please come and sit down. You’re right, there’s nothing in any of those cupboards.’

He closes the cupboard and sits opposite her at the kitchen table. ‘Scrambled eggs on granary toast,’ he suggests. ‘With chives in the eggs. And cheese. That’s what we both need right now. Particularly you, because if I don’t make something substantial for you, you end up skipping meals outright. Or drinking those wretched wallpaper-paste milkshakes.’

‘Adam, we’ve been married for seventeen years, is that correct?’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t know you.’

‘That’s fine,’ Adam says. ‘I doubt that that’s going to be a serious problem. You’ve told me, many times, about your own people who’ve lost themselves in the work and had to bootstrap their own personalities. You love watching it. It’s like watching butterflies emerge from chrysalides. The best of your people can turn that around in two weeks. Imagine how fast it’s going to be for you.’

‘No,’ Quinn replies. Her tone is clinical, matter-of-fact. ‘I’m afraid it’s not possible.’

‘What’s not possible?’

‘I can’t begin a new relationship right now. Certainly not something as serious as a marriage. You have nominal clearance; you know the broad strokes of what we do. I have responsibilities. I do not have … “time.”’

‘This isn’t “new,”’ Adam says, deadpan. ‘It’s preexisting.’

‘No,’ Quinn explains. ‘That relationship is ended now, and we are somewhere else.’

Adam stares at her for a long moment, thin-lipped. He asks her:

‘What do you remember?’

The question is so open-ended that Quinn doesn’t manage to respond verbally. She spreads her hands slightly, the gesture saying, ‘What?’

‘You don’t remember me,’ Adam says. ‘Sunshine also clearly ate the part of you that would care if you forgot me. As well as the part of you that cares about brunch. “What else have you forgotten?” would be a stupid question to ask, so instead I’m asking you, what’s left? I want you to tell me everything you can remember.’

‘*Everything* I can remember?’

‘Yes. Let’s say, from the last twenty years.’

It’s still a farcical question at face value, and Quinn’s first instinct is to dismiss it as such, but she thinks again. She thinks, intending to genuinely try to answer the question. And she finds gaps. There’s a dearth of specifics. It’s like being asked to ‘say something’ and immediately forgetting all words.

She says, ‘I remember … working.’

And driving home, and sleeping, and driving back to work. Big, hostile buildings. Drug regimens, containment protocols, endless piles of opaque numbers, personal fitness drills. Running. Calculating. Never, ever stopping calculating. She remembers, with unfair clarity, a variety of extremely bad dreams.

And other than that, nothing. A huge, deep, ragged-edged black pit.

Adam says, 'You remember nothing good, do you? Nothing good at all.

'When you come home, on the nights you make it home, you are ready to fold up. It has never been an easy job, but these past few years have been the worst they've ever been, because you're coming to the conclusion of something gigantic. You have explained to me how it is that you can never tell me, *really,* what it is you do, without the act of you telling me killing me. And I – I couldn't stand that at first, and I still hate your job and I think it's a monstrous farce – but I trusted you in that. And I stopped asking. But I can tell, from the … rattle in your hands and the things you don't say, and the way you sleep, that there is some kind of war going on back here. And you're losing people to it. And you're almost at the end. And you're going to win.

'So I scramble your eggs, and I play the violin for you, and between us we hack out about three-tenths of what I would consider to be normalcy. Not because you can't do this without me, you could take the whole universe by yourself if you *really* had to, but to blazes with that, you shouldn't have to.

'We didn't connect instantly. But we connected pretty damned fast. We had music in common at first, Bach and Mendelssohn and Nina Simone. We had tobacco in common and a mutual hatred of *The X-Files.* Then it was coffee and wine. And then after some time it became hiking, and birdwatching, and Perseid meteors. I don't like to climb but I hold the rope when you climb. We like Bruce Lee flicks. We watch *Poirot* and *Have I Got News for You* and we read stacks and stacks of books … No, in fairness, it's mainly me for the books. You don't have the long-term time to spare anymore.'

He pinches the bridge of his nose for a second. Any two people can find that much common ground. Just being in the same place for years doesn't count for anything. What do they *have*?

'We communicate,' he says. 'Better than anybody I've seen. We can be apart for two months while I'm on tour or you're overseas and snap right back and pick up a conversation from the word we left off. We're connected, Marie. We are of a mind. You'll see it all. It'll happen again, just as fast. You've just got to give it a chance.'

Quinn is almost there. She sees the shape of what Adam is describing. It's distant and unclear, but if she concentrates she might be able to bring it into

focus. It worries her, for nebulous reasons she can't completely articulate, but she can almost understand how there could be room for it. How it could lock into her life as it currently exists, and still make sense.

But Adam just said something crucial. He said a keyword that means the marriage counselling session is over and this is now a situation. Quinn can't ignore it. She forces herself to drop the other thread and seize this one.

'What war?'

And now Adam really doesn't know what's happening. 'Good God. The war, Marie. I don't know how else to describe it.'

'What war? How many people?'

'I don't know,' Adam says. 'There are names. Names you stop mentioning, and then you ignore me when I bring them up again. I assume there are reasons. I don't know the specifics. How could I know? Why don't you know?'

Quinn races through the reasoning. The existence of a war computes. It confirms long-term suspicions. It could have been going on for years without her realising it. It makes sense to her that she could be fighting it – winning, even – and not know; pruning her own memories or losing them in skirmishes. This certainly won't be the first time she's uncovered it. It makes sense that Adam, naturally gifted with the mental equivalent of a thick layer of blubber, could stand on the edge of the conflict and dimly be able to perceive it. And the Division – so understaffed.

People are disappearing around her.

'And what if –' she begins, and stops dead in the middle of the thought, as if the thought itself was stolen out of her.

'And what if we get back together, and –' she begins again, and this time hard instinct seizes her around the midsection and bodily hauls her back from thinking a thought that, *it* knows, would kill her. She's Wile E. Coyote, she's already run off the edge of a precipice into clear air, and thinking that thought would be like looking down.

She feels U-4987 moving around her, abstractly bound to her, a winking speck of glitter in her eye. 'Something isn't right.'

Adam scratches at his own eye. 'Do you see that?'

'How can *you* see that?'

'I have a mild immunity to antimemetic influence,' Adam says. He knows it's in his file and he knows Quinn has read the file, but apparently it needs to be said again. 'I can tell when something is fritzing with my

memories. I can resist it. Up to a point. So, Marie, I was hoping to have a relaxed conversation over coffee and get around to this topic organically, but I'm going to have to skip to the end: I have the impression that Sunshine is trying to kill me.'

'… No,' Quinn says. 'That's not its behaviour model. It doesn't sustain itself that way, by eating people. It eats *memories*. And it's never done *this*. Not to you, nor me, nor anybody. Not since the very early days. It's tame, domesticated. It does exactly what I tell it to do. Even when I'm waiting, and I'm bored, and I let it eat my short-term, it sits and *waits* to be told to eat.'

'Then what is it doing to us?' Adam is getting nervy, and won't let go of his eye. He stands up and backs away. 'I would like it if we could figure this out quickly. We don't have a way to put Sunshine down.'

There's a sound in Quinn's mind, but not in her ear, like a distant chorus of baying dogs. She stands too, and moves after Adam into the middle of the containment unit.

She says, 'It's trying to protect you.'

'I – How does wiping your memory of me protect me?'

'I can't explain,' Quinn says. 'And I can't explain why I can't explain. I don't fully know myself. There's an [redacted].'

'A *what*?'

'You can't be here,' she says. 'You can't be in my life. You have to leave, or you're going to die.'

'I'm not leaving you,' Adam says. 'Christ, that's why we did it in the end. Tied the knot, I mean. It was scintillatingly obvious to both of us, very early on, that we were forever. But I wanted to get it on the public record. I stood up in front of everybody I respect and I swore to *them* that I would protect you.'

U-4987 is agitated. Quinn feels it flitting around the room, incoherent, trying to tell her what it needs.

She says, with sudden clarity, 'I must have made the same promise.'

Adam doubles over, blinded in both eyes now. Closing his eyes does nothing, covering his eyes does nothing. The gold-white light is strobing for him, moving into violet. He panics. 'Help. Help me. I can't see.' He reaches out, unsteadily, for Quinn's hand. She lets him take it and pull her close. The light doesn't fade. He clings to Quinn for a few moments, and she

holds on to him until he realises that U-4987 is completely within her control, and this is all intentional.

'You're going to do this?' Adam says. 'This is the UO mandate, this is what "keeping everyone safe" amounts to? You've got no idea what you're about to do to yourself. You don't even know me.'

'I think I know,' she replies.

'You will feel this for the rest of your life. Every day, you will wake up with a sick cold feeling in your stomach where there used to be a real life. And you'll wonder why.'

Unseen by him, Quinn takes the autoinjector out of her pocket and regards it for a second. She reaches a conclusion. Determination flashes in her eyes. 'I'm going to win this war,' she says to him. 'I'll beat the universe. And then I will come and find out why.'

Adam holds on to her for another long, long moment. He can hear the baying too, now, and he can even barely perceive what it is, far off behind the hill, that Sunshine is frantic about. That distant dot, that fleeting secondhand glimpse of the shape of it, far off, is enough to terrify him.

He has faith. He knows how fast Marie can put the jigsaw pieces back together, work against a world that makes no sense to her, isolate the truth. He knows she can take the universe. But a sharp misgiving jabs him in the stomach and he can't stop himself saying: 'And what if you lose?'

She kisses him. It's a stranger's kiss; there's nothing there Adam recognises. He breaks off, unsettled. It's a whisper now: 'What if you lose?'

■

Quinn exits the containment unit; she slams and deadlocks the door with a single movement. The heavy metallic *crack* makes the whole building shake.

There are people outside. Ives, Jamie Sitt, Simon Lee and a few others, comparing notes. They look appalled.

She still has the injector in one hand. She holds it to one side, aimed downward, like a weapon. It is capped and unused.

'Fill in his backstory,' she tells them. 'He was never married. Relocate him to where I'll never find him, incinerate all the evidence, then report to me for surgical memory erasure. I'll do myself last.'

And she slots the injector back into her inner jacket pocket.
Ives looks as if he has an objection. She stares him down.
‘My husband’s dead,’ she says.

3

Case Colorless Green

‘Simon, do you have a minute?’

Lee’s expression freezes. It is nine months since he tangled with Adrian Gage/U-7175, he is all the way caught up, and he has relearned and re-re-relearned that ‘a minute’ is Quinn-speak for ‘an hour, maybe the rest of the day.’

‘Sure,’ he lies.

Quinn hands a thin folder to him. A U-document. In modern times, the Unknown database sprawls across multiple storage formats: solid state, tape, paper files. Quinn likes paper. It has some valuable attributes. It’s a shade harder to lose, for one. ‘Something in my reminders went *ping* just now. It was about this.’

He opens the seal. There is just one sheet of paper inside.

Ref.: U-3125 • **Cat.:** ε_0

Containment protocol: U-3125 is kept at the UO Wyeleigh Passive Containment Archive, level 1, vault 601. This containment unit is a 10 × 15 × 3m cuboidal room clad in layers of lead, soundproofing and telepathic shielding. Access is through an airlock system at one end of the containment unit. This airlock is programmed to allow only one person to enter the containment unit at a time, and to remain locked until this person exits before allowing another person to enter.

Under no circumstances may any coherent information be allowed to leave the containment unit. This includes written and electronic notes, photographs, audio and video recordings, sound, electromagnetic and particle-based signals, and psi emanations. During the exit cycle, a purge system rigged to the airlock flushes the occupant's memory by flooding the airlock with amnestic gas for three minutes.

A senior Antimemetics Division staff member must visit U-3125 every 63 days.

END OF FILE

He verifies that the other side is blank. 'You're kidding me. That's the whole entry?'

'That's the whole entry,' Quinn says.

It isn't even the fiftieth strangest thing Lee's seen in the files, but still: 'No description, no acquisition report, no test log, no addenda? No clue who built the unit, or when, or how many times it's been visited, or who carried out the previous visits, or what they took in with them, or how long they were in there?'

'Come with me.'

He gestures at his laptop. 'I'm preparing education. Ideatic measure spaces. These newcomers are quick at the math, I can't stay out ahead of them.'

Quinn flicks her head in the direction they need to go. He sighs and brings the machine with him.

■

It's a five-minute walk from Lee's desk to the room where the containment unit is installed. One question answers itself immediately: the vault is an Ed Hix model. His signature style of containment architecture is recognisable a mile out. Sleek, white, plainly impregnable without the aid of extremely heavy tools. Hix died under anomalously unclear circumstances more than a decade ago, which means the unit is at least that old.

Neither Lee nor Quinn recognises it.

'Ten years is sixty-odd visits. Or more,' Quinn says. 'As for the rest of the omissions, I expect there are good reasons.'

'You expect,' Lee echoes, doubtfully. 'I don't like the idea of you routinely exposing yourself to an Unknown so dangerous that we can't even write the reason why we can't write it down down. Especially because it's impossible for us to recover any usable information this way. You're going to go in, be incommunicado for two hours, and come out a smiling amnesiac. What do we gain from that? It's just a breach risk.'

Quinn hears every word of this and elects to ignore it all. There is a vague shape of familiarity about the entry as written; there are a few word choices that reassure her, in an intangible way, that it was written by someone who knew what they were doing. Possibly her.

Lee's still talking. 'We should just scrub that last line from the file. There can't be *anything* good in that room.'

Quinn puts her keycard in the slot. The slot is marked with an orange and red stripe, indicating the high level of seniority required to access it. Quinn is the only person on the site whose keycard has a matching stripe. The airlock rewards her with green LEDs and begins to cycle open. It's built as a slender vertical cylinder with a single opening. The entire thing rotates on its axis. Inside, there's barely room for a single person to stand without their shoulders touching the walls.

'What are you taking?' Lee asks.

Quinn ducks to step in, turns to face him, and shrugs. 'A stick of nicotine gum.'

'I can get you field gear,' Lee says, as the airlock begins to rotate again, emitting a low, quiet thrum solely as an audible warning that there is machinery in motion. 'We'll raid inventory. Give me fifteen minutes and I'll have Ives turn you into a one-woman war.'

If Quinn says anything in response to this, it's cut off by the soundproofing as the airlock rotates.

Lee is left alone in the antechamber. He stares at the outer door for a worried moment. He presses his ear to the door for a while, but hears nothing. Not even a faint tremble from the airlock mechanism.

He turns away. There's a seat. Not very comfortable. He settles down, reopens his laptop, and tries to context-switch back.

■

Inside, it's pitch-dark for a few seconds, then some unseen sensor detects Quinn's presence and brings the fluorescents up. Half of them, anyway. The others remain inert or flicker aggravatingly.

The room's interior walls are made from milky white glass (bulletproof, knowing Hix) and plastered with paperwork, taped up in vaguely coherent masses. Where there is no paperwork, people have drawn directly on the walls in marker pen. There is a conference table, long and elliptical, covered with more paperwork and a tangle of laptop computers and serpentine power supply cables. Power has returned to the machines and they are slowly booting. A data projector warms up and shines a map of the world over the far wall, almost lining up with a network of scribbled annotations on the same wall. Sticky notes of all colours litter the carpet like autumn leaves.

Other than that, the room is empty.

Skimming the paperwork, Quinn discovers that nearly all of it is handwritten and most of it charts the progress of conversations. Most of the entries are dated and signed, and most of the dates are weeks apart. The conversations are panicked and fearful back-and-forths about dozens of Unknowns, some of them antimemetic in nature but none of them obviously related to one another. None of the notes mention U-3125.

The only name Quinn recognises is her own, which appears on one in ten or twenty of the notes. The notes seem authentic and the handwriting is hers. But her notes also seem as desperate and uncertain in tone as everybody else's. This unnerves her.

There are diagrams on the walls too, which are too complex to decode at a glance, but complex enough to make her eyes hurt to look at them.

But where's the primer? Asynchronous research – whereby the research topic is forgotten entirely between iterations, and rediscovered over and

over – is a perfectly standard practice in the Antimemetics Division, and her people ought to be better trained than this. There should be a logical entry point to the data. An obvious single document to read first, which makes sense of the rest.

'The actual entity category is Epsilon 2,' a voice says. It's her own voice, recorded. 'Not that it makes much of a difference. The database entry you read on the outside is a stub; you already know that. It's not the real document. And U-3125 isn't in this room. You worked that out already, too. Take a seat.'

Quinn moves around the table until she finds the laptop making the sound. There is a video playing, apparently recorded on the laptop's own camera. The Marie Quinn in the video is seated, and looks unfamiliar in a way that takes the one watching a moment to put her finger on. Not exhausted, not sick, not physically injured; she's seen herself that way before, in the mirror. This woman's willpower is gone. She's beaten.

'In fact,' the recorded Quinn says, 'this is the only room in the world where U-3125 is not present. It's called "inverted containment." U-3125 pervades all of reality except for volumes that have been specifically shielded from its influence. And this is it. This is our only safe harbor. This room represents the length and breadth of the war.

'Every competent memetics research project finds U-3125's fingerprints sooner or later. It manifests all over the world, in many different forms. Many of the manifestations aren't even anomalous. Some of them, we already have catalogued separately in the main Unknown database. A very small number of them are even in containment. Impossibly virulent crazes, broken logic, invisible spiders as tall as skyscrapers, people born with extra limbs that nobody can see. That's the raw data. Those manifestations are enough trouble to deal with in their own right …'

The Quinn in the video casts around, picks up a bright green marker pen and a blank piece of paper. She begins drawing a shape that isn't visible from the camera's perspective, while still talking.

'But once you get a little further down the road you start to see a pattern emerging in the data. You need to have the training in memetic science, but once you have that training and you have the data in front of you, it only takes a little extra effort to arrange those data points in conceptual space and draw a contour through them. Those data points are points on U-3125's hull; those manifestations are the shadows it casts on our reality. You link

four or five different Unknowns together into a single shape, and you see it … And it sees you …'

She's still drawing. It's detailed. She doesn't look up, and her tone of voice is distant, almost as if she's narrating the tail end of a frightening children's story:

'When that happens, when you make "eye contact," it kills you. It kills you and it kills anybody who thinks like you. Physical distance doesn't matter, it's about mental proximity. Anybody with the same ideas, anybody in the same headspace. It kills your collaborators, your whole research team. It kills your parents; it kills your children. You become absent humans, human-shaped shells surrounding holes in reality. And when it's done, your project is a crater, and nobody knows what U-3125 is anymore. It is a black hole in antimemetic science, consuming unwary researchers and yielding no information, only detectable through indirect observation. A true description of what U-3125 is, or even an allusion to what it is, constitutes a containment breach and a lethal indirect cognitohazard.

'Do you see? It's a defence mechanism. This information-swallowing behaviour is just the outer layer, the poison coating. It protects the entity from discovery while it infests our reality.

'And as years pass, the manifestations will continue, growing denser and knitting together … until the whole world is drowning in them, and everybody will be screaming, "Why did nobody realise what was happening?" And nobody will answer, because everybody who realised was killed, by this *system* …

'Do you see it, Marie? See it now.'

Quinn is at the core of Organisation antimemetic science. She had all the raw data readily accessible. There are extensive written calculations on the walls, but she doesn't need to study them, she can do them in her head. All it took was that slightest push, that slightest suggestion. Staring through the laptop screen, eyes wide and defocused, she understands how it all links together. She sees U-3125.

It is monumental. She has encountered terrible, powerful ideas before, at every level of memeticity, and subdued them or even recruited them, but what she's picturing now is on another order of magnitude from what she knew to be possible. Now that she knows it's there, she can feel it like cosmic radiation, boring holes in the world with its manifestations and effortlessly silencing anybody who recognises the larger pattern. It is not of

reality, not of humanity; human thought cannot coexist with it. It is from a higher, worse place, and it is descending.

The other Quinn presents her finished diagram. She has drawn a mutated, fractally complex grasping hand with fivefold symmetry. It has no wrist or arm, just five long human fingers pointing in five directions. At its core, there is a pentagonal opening that could be a mouth.

But the diagram was already there. It is plastered across the wall in the background of the video, plain as day, a meticulous collage in green, easily two metres in diametre and showing the same meme complex to a hundred times the level of detail. There are smaller diagrams of different elevations arrayed around it like spores, and its arms are spread wide around the seated Quinn, who sits directly in front of the mouth, with her back to it.

Quinn, watching, does not realise that the collage is there, and does not turn around.

'How do you fight an enemy without ever discovering it exists?' the Quinn in the video asks. 'How do you win without even realising you're at war? What do we *do*?

'Seven years ago there were antimemetics research groups all over the world. It wasn't just us, there were hundreds of groups finding their way into the same questions. Government agencies, military departments, private corporations, university projects. None of those other groups still exist. The last one ceased to exist sometime in the last seventy-two hours.

'Three years ago, UO Antimemetics was a mini-Organisation of more than four thousand people. Today, we are ninety people. Tomorrow it's going to be fewer. Our original headquarters is gone. Obliterated from our collective memory. No one remembers!

'There is no war. We've lost that war. It's over. This is the mopping-up operation. The only reason we still exist at all is because we have better amnestic biochemistry than anybody else in the world. Because that's all you can do when you see U-3125: run away and try to forget what you saw … seek oblivion in chemicals, or alcohol, or head trauma. And even that can't work every time. It's circling in. We meet it over and over again and we don't realise it. There's no way we can stop ourselves from rediscovering it! We're too damned smart!'

She points at something on the wall, out of view of the laptop's camera. Quinn, watching, turns to look. In an upper corner of the room there is a

constellation of dizzyingly complicated schematics. Ed Hix's initials are on every page.

'There's a machine we could build. All it would take is twenty years, a lab the size of a country and all the money in the world. Nothing that the C-suite would blink at if we went to them. But how do we build that machine without any of us realising what it's for? It would be like … designing and building and launching an Apollo rocket without a single engineer deducing that the Moon existed. The logistics would be absurd. Someone would start asking logical questions. And then it would be over. So what do we do?'

'Find another way,' Quinn says to the unhearing recording. The fatalistic tone of voice makes her angry. 'What the hell's wrong with you?'

'… I could tell everybody to walk away. I could send a little message to myself saying, "There's danger down this road, you should disband the Antimemetics Division and pursue other projects." But I'd be suspicious. I'd start asking questions about my own decision, and then it would be over.'

Quinn is now crouched in front of the video, trying to understand what she's watching. 'What's wrong, Marie? Are you okay?'

'I could kill myself in here,' the recording says. 'But my team would find U-3125 without me, and then they'd have to fight U-3125 without me. It's going to happen soon, whatever happens. In the next three months at most. This year, it will be over. I may die in here anyway. I'm on so many mnestic drugs that my endocrine system is shutting down. Taking amnestics at the same time is the chemical equivalent of trepanation. I don't remember the last time I slept without having a nightmare about Adam, and I'm starting to forget whether U-4987 is a real thing or just the number that I gave to my life –'

'You're not like this,' Quinn whispers. 'You're stronger than this. What happened to you? Who's Adam?'

'I don't know how we survive this. I don't know how we win. We're the last ones in the world. After us, there's nobody.'

Quinn shakes her head, not believing it.

'So I'm done. I'm going to walk out of this room and forget all about this problem and then I'm going to be you, Marie, the last Marie, and you have to [redacted] a way out of this, because I can't.' She gets up and moves off-screen. She can be heard breathing deeply. Her speech is starting to

distort. ‘God, my eyes hurt. I think something’s starting to [redacted] inside.’

She gets up, unsteadily. She looks away from the camera, in the direction of the airlock. It looks like she wants to say more. But she thinks better of it, and terminates the recording.

■

Quinn stares at her reflection in the dark screen, for a long minute.

She’s never seen herself so weak. To see herself that way has damaged her self-confidence. She feels disconnected from what she saw, like it happened in an alternate universe. She feels revulsed and appalled by that version of her, more so to know that that version is still inside her somewhere. *It doesn’t make sense. I’m looking at all of the same facts. What made her give up? What did she know that I don’t?*

Who was Adam?

The answer to this question is so obvious and sickening that she instinctively distrusts it. She circles around the answer, probing it, trying to find reasons to reject it, but it is inescapable. Adam was someone she knew when the video was recorded, now completely removed from her memory. Adam was someone the thought of whose safety paralysed her with fear. Someone in the same headspace. Someone she couldn’t bear to lose.

And then she lost.

But what if …

(But how’d the room get built in the first place? Anybody’s guess. Quinn imagines Hix building it as a proof of concept, followed by a cascading series of lucky chances that led to it becoming the war room. Someone discovered U-3125 at random, while sealed in the room; they wrote notes to themselves that set up the skeletal external Unknown database entry and the containment protocol; most of the paperwork and computer hardware was left behind by later visitors … It could have happened …)

But what if there’s another room?

Right then, unbidden, a cute factoid comes back to her. UO Wyeleigh is a large, old complex, and almost completely vacant. There are offices aboveground, laboratories and containment units belowground. And far, far below the basement levels there is an empty heavy engineering lab, an

underground complex the size of a football pitch. Self-contained, in pristine condition, totally disused. Sealed up, original purpose forgotten. Nobody has entered it in living memory. Built who-knows-how-many decades back by a dead generation of antimemeticists. For reasons 'unknown.'

What if that's where we built our weapon?

Do I really believe I'm that smart? That my team and I had that much foresight? That we got that lucky?

She turns to look at the airlock, running the numbers in her head.

She had ninety people. I have … thirty-eight. Nine weeks until the next iteration. That's past the end of the year. It'll be too late. If I leave this room now, I will never be back. The plan I have now is the best plan there's ever going to be.

I can't defeat the airlock. Not an Ed Hix model. Not from the inside, using nothing but office equipment. So it's the hard way, then. The cycle takes three minutes. And as soon as I'm through, U-3125 will see. It'll know.

We're the last ones in the world. After us, there's nobody.

■

Lee is so deeply buried in work and the airlock is so quiet that it cycles almost all the way open before he notices.

'We need to check you for notes,' he begins, but then he sees that Quinn is curled up in the bottom of the narrow cylinder, panting as though she just finished a marathon run. Lee holds a hand out but she shakes her head, electing to stay down, knees bent up to her chest, sucking down lungfuls of air.

'What in the hell happened in there?' Lee asks.

'Just need …' she gasps, '… to breathe. Be okay in a … second. Haaaaah. I think I blacked out for a moment, might have inhaled some. Haaaaah. I think I'm okay. I remember the plan.'

Lee looks confused and worried for a second. Then it replaces him. 'You shouldn't be able to remember anything. What did you do?'

'Hit my head,' Quinn says, then goes back to concentrating on breathing properly. She suddenly becomes acutely aware that Lee has her effectively cornered. Disliking this arrangement, for reasons that she's only gradually

putting back together, she levers herself up to one shoulder and tries to stand. Lee puts a hand on her shoulder and pushes her back down.

'You look terrible,' he says. 'There's something [redacted] your neck. Do you see that?' He points at her throat, then taps the same spot on his own.

'What?'

'On your neck. [redacted] been infected by whatever was in there. We need to act quickly.' He pulls a multi-tool from an inside pocket and unfolds a short, gleaming blade. He does this in such a methodical, ordinary way that Quinn almost doesn't react when he leans down toward her to cut her throat.

Almost. She grips his wrist. They're locked like that for a moment, a tableau. She looks into Simon Lee's eye, but it isn't his eye anymore. She squints, wondering if she's making eye contact with anything but a hole in space. Lee was, of course, in the same headspace as her. But she had hoped, prayed to her little god, that he would not succumb so quickly. And in a crazed little way she'd thought there would be at least a sign, a theatrical doubling-over as his mind was wrenched out of its socket.

She already feels the force bearing down on her own skull, trying to drill into it. But she knows its shape. And she discovers to her fleeting surprise that there is a kind of bulwark inside of her, something in her heart that's pushing back, hard. She can hold out, maybe for a few minutes. Long enough. Barely.

Lee's wrist spasms as he tries to drive the knife forward. Quinn parries and its tip glances off the airlock interior wall with a screech. They scuffle for an awkward second, then she boots Lee in the stomach with both feet, sending him sprawling in the antechamber. She launches out of the airlock, dives over him, and sprints away from the containment unit.

She feels U-3125 following her as she runs, like a spotlight. She hears a distant crash in another part of the building, as the first piece of ceiling caves in.

4

Your Last First Day

Marie Quinn is curled in the corner of UO Wyeleigh's main freight elevator, descending, clutching a shiny black ray gun almost as long as she is tall. The gun has a two-tined prong instead of a barrel and its stock is a weirdly asymmetrical mass of delicate pipework, more like a Swiss watch or a small intestinal tract than a weapon. The gun is U-7381, and the severely disturbed physicist from whom it was confiscated went to her grave insisting that she didn't build it, she summoned it.

A tornado of violence and destruction is tearing through Wyeleigh and through the minds of everybody working at Wyeleigh. Ceilings are being brought down. The site pharmacy is a sucking hole at the side of the building. The armory is buried. She had to settle for anomalous weaponry instead, retrieved during a brief stop in the underground experimentation labs. The Antimemetics Division operatives she meets in the corridors are all broken, some of them curled up and raving while their minds evaporate and they die one memory at a time, some infected with a collection of ideas that compel them to shout guttural phrases in strange languages, and to procure blades – never guns – and work on those demented victims, and each other, and themselves.

Quinn doesn't recognise any of the people. Their faces are all wrong, torn up with misery and hatred and vindictive glee. She's been trying to avoid fighting, but she's had to kill one man in self-defence. Fired at his heart, U-7381 simply erased a half-metre-wide cylinder of matter, removing his upper torso and lower jaw. He fell to the ground in four pieces. U-7381's beam is invisible, silent and recoilless. It was like using a child's toy gun.

Quinn is petrified, but more than that, angry. 'This is too much,' she says, out loud, willing her heart rate back under control. 'I can't deal with this. I shouldn't have to deal with this. It's my fucking first day!'

■

But how much sense does that make? Quinn studies her reflection in the dark glass of the elevator control panel, and she tours the interior of her own skull, examining her thought processes. There are hints there, which would be difficult to articulate to someone who didn't know her as well as she knows herself. She isn't thinking like a newbie. She's instinctively breaking the problem apart, the way an experienced Organisation operative should. Hell, a newbie wouldn't even know how to carry out a detailed psychological self-examination of this kind. A newbie wouldn't even think of it; a newbie would just suffocate.

'The first thing it did when it saw me,' she explains to her reflection, 'was eat everything I knew about the Division. And everything I knew about *it*. If I had a plan, it ate the plan … But I'm still me. So I can come up with that plan again. It's already right in front of me, I just need to see it. If I were me, what would my plan have been?'

She scratches absently at her left wrist.

'Taking some hardcore mnestic drugs would have been a smart first step, I guess,' she mutters. 'Reinforcing my mind, so that it can't erase the rest of the steps. Damn.' The nearest source of mnestic medicine is the site pharmacy, but it's already been destroyed, and in any case the elevator is headed down, away from it.

No. Stop. The pharmacy's been destroyed? How do I know that?

Well, because she was there. She remembers finding the pharmacist crushed to death beneath a fallen medical cabinet, her skull an unrecognisable splatter of scarlet. She remembers the floor being torn away beneath her feet, and only barely making it out of that portion of the building alive.

She remembers – a modular red package with an enormous white *Y* on it, and a biohazard symbol. Her heart nearly stops at this. *Oh, God. What did I do?*

She remembers the dozens of warnings covering the package; she remembers the three-factor authorisation procedure she had to follow to get into the sealed container where it was stored; she remembers the centimetre-thick book of medical advisory information, which she discarded; and, rolling her left sleeve back, she finds a fresh needle mark with a speck of blood, and remembers administering the injection.

This was my plan? This is what it takes to fight U-3125? I've killed myself –

Class Y mnestics represent the state of the art of non-anomalous biochemical memory fortification. Class Y mnestics permanently destroy the subject's ability to forget. The result is perfect eidetic memory and perfect immunity to arbitrarily strong antimemetic interference.

The dose is taking effect now. Quinn didn't read the book because she already knew every word of it. She knows everything that's about to happen to her. She can already feel her mind hardening, like steel, and the developing symptoms of extreme sensory overload.

She can see everything.

There are extra buttons on the elevator control panel, the lowest of which, the thirtieth floor below ground level, she's somehow already pushed. The walls of the elevator are covered with graffiti scrawled by the desperate and dying, people whose conceptual presence was eradicated from reality years earlier by the Adrian Gage antimemetic kill agent, reducing them to the level of ghosts. In one corner of the freight elevator there is even a half corpse, unidentifiable, so many layers removed from reality that not even flies can smell it, its cells winking out of existence asymptotically over the course of years.

There is a fistful of tiny white worms exploring the floor of the elevator car, near where she's sitting. Revolted, Quinn shuffles back from them, shaking one or two more of them out of her hair. The worms are among the most widespread and successful antimemetically cloaked organisms in the world. They are everywhere, in every biome, in every room.

She can hear a long, alarming drone noise, a continual roaring that has the texture of ambient noise and is continually getting louder. It's as if it's been there for her entire life, and it's only now that she's begun to hear it.

And the memories. Short-term, long-term. The taste of every pill, the dull roll of every mile she's ever driven. The man she killed, it was Ives. That should have been impossible but his movements made no sense –

It's too much data. Too much sound, too much light. Having her eyes open is like jamming them full of needles. She clamps her hands over her ears and screws her eyes up. Even like this, she feels the vibration of the elevator's slow descent and the heat of the failed air-conditioning and the movement of her clothes on her skin, and meanwhile her vision is flooding instead with what could be hallucinations. The human sensorium routinely

generates huge amounts of data, and the human brain is adapted to discard almost all of that data nearly immediately. Altering the brain's behaviour to retain that data is extremely dangerous even for very short time spans.

Quinn takes one hand away from her ear for just long enough to punch the metal wall of the elevator car, bloodying two knuckles. The pain gives her a focal point, a memory that screams a little louder than the rest.

And she finds the plan. The plan that was always the plan, the plan that she's rebuilt a hundred times, synonymous with her whole existence.

'I can beat you,' she says. 'I know how.'

'No,' U-3125 says to her. 'You don't.'

■

The elevator stops at the thirtieth floor belowground and its doors grind open. They wait, open, for a long time. Farther up the elevator shaft there are the distant rumbles of more parts of the Wyeleigh complex being reduced to rubble.

Still crouched in the corner, Quinn mutters, 'U-3125 doesn't have a voice.'

'Die wrong,' it suggests.

'U-3125 is a five-dimensional anomalous mass of corrosive ideas, seeping through to our physical reality. It isn't coherent and it isn't intelligent. It can't communicate. This is an auditory hallucination.'

'That's all you are, isn't it, Marie? Dead wrong. Over and over. How many people are buried under that judgment of yours? And you're still here. All those lost battles, every year of that entire lost war, but somehow you always find enough dumb luck to walk away. The eternal sole survivor. You don't deserve that kind of luck. Nobody does. Do you know what you deserve?'

While it's talking, Quinn leans hard on the ray gun to get to her feet. She lodges one shoulder against the wall of the elevator car, still with her eyes closed. She braces herself, and opens her eyes. The corridor ahead is empty. There's an airlock at the far end, this one large enough to drive a truck through, built from ultra-toughened white metal alloy in Ed Hix's established style. There's a panel beside the airlock. She closes her eyes

again and hobbles forward, using the ray gun as a crutch, stretching one hand out ahead of her as guidance.

'Someone has to be last,' she says, gritting her teeth. 'Someone has to be the best.'

U-3125 follows her. 'Do you remember how your mom died?'

'No.'

'What it was like to watch? How long it took?'

'No.' She's lying. It was the worst thing she had ever seen. She tried so hard, for so long, to forget it.

She reaches the airlock.

'Your whole Division is dead. Minds scooped out, like eyeballs. Hollow people, holes in space for brains. It's just you, Marie. Dying from mnestic overdose. Buried alive. Up against an immortal, unkillable idea. *You're going to find out. Not long now.*'

She fumbles blindly with the panel until she finds the slot for her keycard. For a few seconds it seems as if nothing is happening; then a yellow light flashes, the enormous mechanical interlocks unlatch, and the door cycles open with all the fuss of a flower's petals unfurling. Noise, Hix always held, is a symptom of imperfect engineering.

Behind her, she hears the freight elevator close up and return to ground level, and she knows that someone has summoned it, intending to pursue her.

'Ideas can be killed,' she says, stepping into the airlock.

'How?'

'With better ideas.'

As the airlock cycles closed, so does the hermetic seal. U-3125 falls silent, shut out.

■

If something can cross over from conceptual space into reality, taking physical form, then something can cross in the opposite direction. It must be possible to take a physical entity, mechanically extract the *idea that it embodies,* amplify that idea, and broadcast it up into conceptual space. A bigger idea. A better idea, one designed specifically to fight U-3125.

But what entity? Where do you start from?

The machine Quinn needs to build, the amplifier, is the size of an Olympic stadium. And she doesn't have a fraction of the heavy memetic engineering experience to do it, let alone the material resources or the time. But she knows – she has always known – that an Antimemetics Division operative is as good on their first day as they're ever likely to be. And the same must be true of the Division as a whole.

The Division has to be good enough. The idea of it, the fearless ideal. She, who embodies the Division, the last and fiercest, has to be good enough.

She tells herself: *We won this war on the day it began. When we encountered U-3125 for the first time, we built this bunker. Ed Hix faked his death and sequestered himself here so he could work uninterrupted, while the rest of the Division held on for as long as humanly possible, buying time for this moment. I know this is what I did, because it's what I would have done.*

You start from a person. I'm the final component. He's waiting for me.

■

The space beyond the airlock is gigantic, structured and lit like an aircraft hangar and filled with hot, stale, dry air. Quinn, still mostly blind, stumbles forward across an expanse of more than a hectare of flat, dusty epoxy flooring. 'Hix!' she shouts into the void. 'It's time!' Nothing comes back but the echo.

She glances up for a second. The space is empty. The castle-sized memetic amplification/broadcasting unit that Ed Hix was meant to be building is absolutely absent. Hix himself is absent.

Maybe the entire machine is antimemetically cloaked? she wonders, momentarily. It would be a smart way to conceal the operation even from the rest of the Organisation. But her brain is curdling in some of the strongest mnestic drugs imaginable. There's genuinely nothing here.

Almost nothing. At the centre of the space there's a small outpost, a group of trestle tables with tools and toolboxes scattered about. Parked behind it is an unmarked military truck with flat tires. On the back of the truck is a squat, squarish machine the size of a shipping container, with unshielded wiring and exposed pipework, and a long cable leading to a

heavy-duty control panel on the floor. To the untrained eye, it is not at all clear what the machine is designed to do.

It is the antimemetic equivalent of a hydrogen bomb. An ultimate emergency measure. Activated, it will blast a gigantic hole in ideatic space where the Antimemetics Division was. There will be no Division and no UO Wyeleigh afterward. Wyeleigh will be a forgotten zone, an unlocatable irrelevance, isolated from the rest of reality. Its staff, whether on or off the site, will drop dead on the spot, minds flattened, and disappear from the collective memory of the world. The Organisation will continue onward, oblivious to the sucking wound in its org chart. Mahlo won't blink as it happens.

It's the wrong machine.

It can't destroy or contain U-3125, or even injure it. It is aimed in the wrong direction, and it wouldn't matter if it weren't. All it can do is sterilise today's outbreak. The other symptoms will persist. Fifty or ten or five years from now, or maybe one year or maybe tomorrow, U-3125 will return, bringing with it its Cat. ε scenario. Human civilisation will be entirely eradicated as an abstract concept and replaced with something unimaginably worse.

Quinn leans there on the ray gun for a long moment. The pressure of information in her mind, continually increasing, reaches a point where she can't take it anymore, and she starts to break. Five decades of memories are screaming at her. It's impossible to discern one from another, any more than she could pick a single voice out from a furious crowd of hundreds of thousands. The Class Y has been in her system for long enough now that she knows for a fact she has irreversible brain damage. There is no antidote. She'll be lucid for another hour, then spend the remaining two or three hours of her life vegetative.

That's right, she thinks. It's almost a relief. *This is good. This is right.*

I've survived too long. I forgot which universe this was. For a while there, I thought, maybe … this was the universe where we win sometimes.

The agony in her head is like an ice axe, now. She drops the ray gun with a clatter, sinks to her knees, lies down, and waits for either death or a better idea.

■

A being superficially resembling Simon Lee arrives at the outer airlock door. It examines the airlock uncomprehendingly for a few moments, then finds the keycard slot. It hunts methodically through Lee's pockets, then remembers the keycard around its neck. The airlock cycles once more and not-Lee goes through. Behind it, the freight elevator is returning to ground level a third time, to fetch the others.

In the next room, the being that is not Simon Lee finds Quinn, unconscious, with the ray gun dropped beside her. There is also a military truck, which it disregards.

Not-Lee lets its keycard fall from its fingers and scoops up the ray gun. For a moment it contemplates the unconscious Quinn, then examines the gun itself, remembering how it works. It turns back to face the airlock and fires, punching fat cylindrical holes in the white metal of the inner door until it's gone, then the outer door too, breaching the hermetic seal. A faint smile returns to not-Lee's face as U-3125 and its familiar, comforting signals flood into the bunker.

Ten more non-people are arriving by freight elevator, former Antimemetics Division bodies. 'I've found her,' not-Lee calls out to them. It drops the ray gun where it's standing and pulls out its knife again. It holds the knife between two fingers, in a casual, offhand sort of way, as if it were a pencil or screwdriver.

The infected non-people gather with not-Lee around Quinn, looking down at her with expressions of disgust, or pity, or malice.

'Why isn't she [redacted] properly?' someone asks. 'She can't meet them unless she's open.'

'Start with her eyes,' says someone else. 'It'll make the rest of her easier to correct.'

Not-Lee leans down to start work.

Quinn's mind is uninhabitable now. Her thoughts are like sludge, a concentrated, toxic slurry of everything bad that has ever happened to her. But there is something else there. A tiny, barely perceptible glint of unexplained, unsnuffed hope. A ray of sunshine.

Muck folds over it and swamps it, instantly. She doesn't know what it was. She doesn't have thought anymore. But it was there.

Not-Lee hesitates, its knife a few centimetres from Quinn's eye. She is whispering something, so quietly that only it can hear her clearly.

‘None of this happened, Simon,’ she says. ‘You and I never existed. There is no Antimemetics Division.’

There’s a sharp *click* as the bomb finishes powering up. Nobody in the room can hear this but Quinn. Nobody in the room can perceive the bomb but Quinn. All they can see is an empty truck.

The world goes black.

Quinn's God

Ref.: U-2200 • **Cat.:** 1

Containment protocol: U-2200 is kept on a plinth in vault 4J in the Passive Containment Archive at UO Wyeleigh. Vault 4J, like all of those in the Passive Containment Archive, must be kept secure and receive bimonthly integrity inspections. U-2200 itself is entirely inanimate and requires no upkeep.

Organisation staff of rank L or higher are free to visit U-2200 outside of these inspections, provided that they first fill in form D-02 to acknowledge U-2200's probable amnestic effect on them. Visitors must wear the supplied telepathic adapter to ensure that U-2200's half of any conversation can be recorded.

Description: U-2200 is a heavily worn, approximately egg-shaped 1.07-metre-tall monolith of tenasserite limestone inhabited by Gua, a non-corporeal entity that claims to be the prehistoric Johorean god of forgetting how to ride a bicycle.

Aside from its ability to communicate telepathically, U-2200's propensity to consume the part of a human's memory where they remember how to ride a bicycle is its sole confirmed anomalous property. The process, henceforth 'feeding,' is harmless, painless and instantaneous; relearning the skill takes a typical Organisation staff member 1 to 3 hours with guided instruction. U-2200 does not appear to require regular feeding and often (during ~70% of opportunities) chooses not to feed. It can feed on the same individual multiple times, with no apparent negative effects on the individual.

Organisation staff who have interacted with U-2200 describe it variously as 'fun company,' 'cheeky but basically harmless,' and 'extremely irritating.' It is one of approximately 40 gods and godlike entities known by the Organisation to exist. Of these 40, it is noted as the least powerful and the least dangerous.

History: The stone is believed to have been carved during the late Neolithic, from the rock of Mount Kaing in what is now the Malaysian state of Johor. The British Museum acquired the stone as part of a large collection of cultural artifacts shipped from the Johor Sultanate in 1848. The stone was then kept in storage for almost sixty years. In 1907 an Organisation researcher visited the British Museum archives for an unrelated task, passed close to the storage crate containing U-2200, and then found himself unaccountably unable to cycle home that evening. He identified the anomalous artifact that had caused the effect by smuggling his bicycle into the archives and riding it slowly down the aisles. Following this, the Organisation established contact with Museum authorities and arranged for the acquisition of the stone. Telepathic contact with U-2200 was established soon afterward.

Responsibility for storage and study of U-2200 was transferred to the Organisation's Antimemetics Division in 1982.

U-2200 claims to have dwelled within the stone since its carving, more than 5,000 years ago. Exactly what U-2200 did between that time and the invention of the first actual bicycle in the 19th century is a matter of some debate. Consensus among Organisation academics is that U-2200 did nothing, and probably did not exist in its present form. U-2200, however, claims that the bicycle has been invented dozens of times by cultures in all parts of the globe over the course of the past 5,000 years, only for U-2200 to engulf, consume and negate all human knowledge not only of the riding of bicycles but of the mechanism of the bicycle, before lapsing back into dormancy. It calls this 'the Bicyclecycle.' It also claims to have 'other stones' in various parts of the world, including cycle trails near Manteigas, Portugal; Nagano, Japan; and the Mount Stromlo Observatory in the Australian Capital Territory, and to be able to freely visit these and observe or suppress cycling activities there.

Following extensive research, the Organisation has discovered no archaeological or historical evidence to support U-2200's version of events, nor any evidence to support either the existence of other stones or U-2200's ability to leave its current stone. It is considered a highly unreliable source of information about the history of the bicycle, modern cycling culture, Johorean culture, prehistoric Malaysia and most other topics.

Interview log 276, [redacted]:

[Marie Quinn enters the containment unit and sits heavily in a visitor's chair. She says nothing for several seconds.]

U-2200: Ah, she has had a bad week.
QUINN: I don't want to talk about it.
U-2200: You need to take a month off in Barbados starting today, or you will explode.
QUINN: *[Sighs.]* I can't take a month off, Gua. We've had this conversation –
U-2200: Lies. Fly out this evening. There is a secret waterfall in the rainforest there, as tall as this building. I will direct you to it. Strip naked and jump over the falls. You will dwell in the plunge pool until I send further instructions. You will subsist on breadfruit.
QUINN: The work doesn't stop. The world doesn't stop spinning. People need me. I can't spare a month. I'm lucky if I can find one day right now.
U-2200: Very well. When will that next day be?
QUINN: Theoretically, tomorrow.
U-2200: What psychedelic drugs do you have access to?

[Quinn glares at U-2200.]

U-2200: Go home and take them. No?
QUINN: I do not have access to any mind-altering substances. Other than. You know. The officially sanctioned ones. For work.
U-2200: Those are useless. Dispose of them. Do you want me to set you up?
QUINN: How the – It is absolutely impossible that you could 'set me up.' How in the world would that work?
U-2200: I have someone. I'm cool.
QUINN: You 'have someone'? On my staff? Who? Don't answer that. Every conversation you have is recorded. It would be impossible for you to make a *contact* of that kind without it being caught. *[Glances angrily at the CCTV camera.]* I'm going to check those recordings. Gua, do not 'set me up.' Do not tell one of my reports that I'm in need of whatever it is you were about to set me up with. *[Closes eyes, clutches temple.]* You can't set me up. You're winding me up again. I can't believe I let you do this to me.
U-2200: Alcohol, then. Do you have alcohol?

Quinn: I don't know. We have a cellar. There's a refrigerator down there. And I know for a fact that there's champagne in the refrigerator. Waiting for a special occasion.

U-2200: What special occasion?

Quinn: … I legitimately don't remember.

U-2200: Go home tonight and drink that champagne. The whole bottle. Become incapable and unbalanced. Do this in my honour. The special occasion will be that the world has not *fucking ended.*

Quinn: I need to keep my head clear. I'm on call every minute of the year. We're so short-staffed, there's no one else. What if something breaks containment while I'm 'elsewhere'? What if a … Cat. Epsilon Unknown decides to do the thing we Catted it Epsilon for?

U-2200: For you, I will take care of it.

Quinn: *[Laughs briefly, then coughs for a long time.]* Oh, God.

U-2200: You need to relax. The inside of your skull is a prison cell, and you need to get out of it.

Quinn: I can't. I can't do it.

U-2200: *[Grunts, exasperated.]* You come to me for advice, *sayang*, and reject all of it. Resign from the Organisation! Raise goats! … Have you discussed this week's events with your husband?

Quinn: He isn't cleared. It's for his own protection. He knows it. He knows he wouldn't ever sleep again if I told him what there is.

U-2200: You must trust him. You can.

[Quinn says nothing.]

U-2200: Go home immediately and make love to him.

[Quinn considers this for a second, then stands up and exits the containment unit.]

Ojai

Organisation operative James Bess is monolithic: nearly two metres tall and broad-shouldered, with a silhouette that's almost triangular. He is bald, bearded and immaculately presented. His suit is tailored; there are few that will fit him off the rack.

He arrives at the Green place first thing after dawn, six o'clock. The address is isolated, an acre or two of ill-maintained scrubland off a spur of a spur of the main highway north out of Ojai.

Bess is part of the Organisation's Memetics Division. His subdivision specialises in Unknown Religious Expressions. Viral, personality-driven meme complexes. Bad ideas. Cults.

'Green' is not the name of the cult that Bess is here to confront, but a code name. Bess doesn't know the real name. At the briefing last night, it was explained that there are legitimate security reasons to use code names instead of true names here, but those reasons were not explained. Bess, no fool, took this to mean that there is some form of hazardous effect surrounding the true names. Unless – he has only been with the Organisation for a handful of years, but he knows this is a possibility – somebody straight-up forgot to record the real names, and is trying to cover for themselves.

If there's a U number, he hasn't been told it.

■

The house is an ugly white sprawl. One storey, wood construction, no two windows alike in design … decaying. There are piles of junk, lumber, rusted vehicle components, drums of filthy green water. Willow and sycamore trees are encroaching from two and a half sides, drizzling leaves and seeds and miscellaneous biological gunk all over the roof, clogging the gutters. Through the windows, only closed curtains and blinds are visible. The front door is standing ajar.

Bess proceeds inside, cautiously. The entrance opens almost directly onto a large lounge/diner/kitchen area. The room is darkened, light mostly spilling from the entrance door – Bess leaves it open – and feeling its way around the edges of the window coverings. The place is dirty, and smells of mold. The still air is like an oven, and it's extremely quiet except for the faint, animated sound of someone talking, way down the hall, words not entirely clear.

'… wasps and, yeah, it's going to be sharp inside. When you accept it, that's [redacted] bleed from …'

Bess moves down the hall, passing a wall decoration that was once a portrait mirror but has been completely painted over in black.

After a brief search, during which he ascertains that the rest of the house is empty, he comes to the final room. This door is closed, but the focused rambling is coming from inside:

'… at home, it's super easy. I'm going to give you something. An easy two-part project for you to take away, and don't forget [redacted] below. Part one: Find someone weaker than you …'

Bess knocks, loudly, twice.

The patter stops. Nothing else is heard. Bess opens the door.

The room is dark, its window blocked with a thick curtain. There's a computer desk in the corner opposite the door, about as cluttered as a desk can realistically get, strewn with partially disassembled hardware, storage drives, chocolate wrappers, scraps of paper, pens. There's a gaming mouse, unable to move for junk. There's a good-quality video camera setup, a monitor, video feeds on the monitor, dust.

There's a cheap, skeletal swivel chair in front of the monitor and a man of about twenty-four slouched uncomfortably in the chair. He is skinny, with discoloured, pale skin that Bess thinks could be caused by malnutrition. He has what was at one point a stylish, fashionable haircut but is now in some disrepair, and when he turns around Bess sees that he has

dark rings around his eyes. It looks as if he hasn't slept in a year. He reeks. The room is filled with that odour, almost thick enough to see.

In the same way that the anomalous viral/religious phenomenon – the cult, gathering around and above this young man like an anvil cloud – is named 'Green,' he himself is named 'Red.'

'Good morning,' Bess says. 'We saw your streams.'

The man pulls his headphones down. 'The hell are you?'

'My name's James Bess. I'm part of an organisation that – ah –'

Red launches out of his chair like a greyhound from a cage. He comes fist-first, losing the headphones. Bess shifts his weight slightly to his left, leaning away from the punch. He catches Red's arm and pulls it forward, violently, deflecting the attack's momentum and bringing the man teeth-first into the doorframe. Red stumbles back, crouching. He finds his footing swiftly. Froth is developing at the corners of his mouth, mixing with blood. Scrabbling around the junk on the floor, he puts his hand on a soldering iron.

As Red comes forward again, Bess wastes a critical split second trying to trace the iron's cable, to figure out whether it's plugged in and hot or not. It's not, but that's enough distraction that Red gets right up there, driving the iron up into Bess's gut with both hands. There's an electronic screech and a spark of orange light; the iron holes Bess's shirt but skids off his abdomen, opening a long tear. There's bare skin underneath. His shield is invisible, partly mythical, and protects his seemingly exposed head just as well as the rest of him.

Bess takes Red in a headlock. Some haphazard kicking ensues, less well choreographed. Red has a demon's energy behind him but Bess has, to be blunt, arrived prepared. In a few more moves, Red is disarmed, stunned, flat on his back and good for nothing.

Bess takes stock. The number of genuine, fight-for-your-life fights he's been in is still in single digits. This one ranks about in the middle. Fifteen seconds of activity; both of them made mistakes. A learning experience.

'Then I'll skip the introductions,' he says to Red. 'The live streaming vector was novel. We hadn't seen that before. Very effective compared to the generic self-help-book-and-walled-compound model. You get a gold star for originality. But we predicted it decades back and we had the containment protocol ready to go. We have people at the streaming services.

As I speak, we're locking you out of your account. We're using your own channels to distribute inoculation codes.'

Bess tries to tidy his shirt up. It's not going to work. Never mind.

'But you're the source,' he says. 'A simple inoculation code would glance off. Physical intervention is required.' He reaches inside his jacket – where he has a perfectly serviceable gun, which he elected to leave where it is for this confrontation – and produces a device not unlike an ophthalmologist's scope. He kneels, lifts Red's right eyelid, and aims the scope at it, projecting a brilliant white spot of light that bathes the entire eye and causes it to lock open. Almost all of Red's musculature locks up as well, effectively pinning him to the floor. His teeth clench.

Bess says to Red, 'This man is innocent. Nobody deserves what you've done to him. Release him and leave this reality forever.'

Through gritted teeth, Red says, 'Who. The hell. Are you?'

'Okay.' Bess pushes another button, changing the projected light pattern from a pure white disc into a complex spiral star design in red and blue. There's a *crack,* like ribs being forced apart. And a pause.

'Well,' Bess says, with a gentler tone, focusing on his scope. 'There's some good news. I can still see you in there.'

Red breathes harshly through his nose, and doesn't seem to be able to speak.

'I don't need to tell you that you're in a really bad place right now,' Bess says. 'Something has gone wrong. And that thing, that *thing that went wrong,* has found you and abducted you and replaced you. It's out here now, using your skin as a finger puppet, walking you around, making you talk. Replicating. The nightmare that you're having is being had by a hundred thousand people. That's the bad news. The good news is that I got here in time. And there's a good chance that I can pull you out.'

No response. Red's eyes start to relax. One stares up at the ceiling, the other into the scope.

'Focus on the red and blue spiral,' Bess says. His voice slows. 'Think about its beauty. The absorbing complexity it has. You could spend forever exploring it. The spiral spreads and flourishes inside of your mind. Occupying more space. The more you think about the spiral, the more you realise you can't think about anything but the spiral.'

Red has nothing to say to this. His breathing stabilises.

‘Your thoughts are slowed,’ Bess continues, speaking with a hypnotic rhythm. ‘The spirals fill you up, recursively, like ice crystals, until you can’t move. Your brain knows it’s being poisoned. You feel a reflexive need to look away or block out what you’re seeing. You know instinctively that a long exposure is fatal. But you can’t look away. You don’t have a choice.’

There is a long, heavy pause, during which Bess does nothing but shine poisonous light into the young man’s eye, while studying the readout on his scope, tracking the progress of the ocular response, waiting for a particular tell. It’s not a clear-cut thing; there’s a small amount of guesswork. He waits until he’s sure. Finally, he releases the button on the scope, shutting it off.

The man is now completely inert.

■

Bess stands up, knees creaking. He relaxes, sighs. His shoulders untense a little. He puts the scope away.

‘You can think of this as memetic chemotherapy,’ he says. Red, whose real name he has been told to avoid discovering, should still be able to hear him. ‘The spiral symbol is an elementary cognitopoison. A long exposure is fatal. But a just barely nonfatal exposure is fully recoverable. You will recover from this poison, and the nightmare cannot. You will survive and it will die. Because you, my guy, are an intelligent, creative human being, and that thing is …’

He reflects on his briefing, and what he knows of the Green phenomenon, and the hundred thousand people suffering and raving inside it right now. They are in all parts of the globe. He has seen some photographs of what takes place in homes occupied by Red’s appalling messages. He’s heard a strictly limited amount of highly redacted audio.

Dispassionate people make better field decisions, that’s the rule he was always taught. But remaining dispassionate is harder on some days than others.

‘… a piece of shit.’

Bess potters around the room for a little while, taking a closer look at some of the computer hardware. Nothing notable there, although he finds a stand for the soldering iron. There’s also a narrow camp bed in the room, with a bedraggled sleeping bag and some other junk. He clears the sleeping

bag away and loads the man onto the camp bed, in a recovery position, facing away from the wall. He pulls the curtain open. It's an obnoxiously sunny day, and the Sun is aimed right in through the window.

Finally, Bess picks up the swivel chair and settles into it, on the far side of the room, where he can keep an eye on his patient. He pulls an Organisation-issued phone from his pocket, along with a horrendously tangled pair of cheap earbuds, which he begins to untangle. The procedure will take six to ten hours. He has podcasts.

A shadow passes across the room. Bess looks around briefly, but whatever it is has gone. He thinks nothing of it.

■

A little less than an hour later, he notices the man's smallest finger twitch. And a very slightly heavier-than-normal intake of breath. He pulls up a medical form on his phone, a list of the normal stages in the cognitopoison recovery process. He makes a note of the time.

'Good progress.'

Sometime after that, the man manages to force a word out. It's barely audible, but when Bess sees him inhale to make the effort, he pulls his earbuds out and crouches beside him, listening.

The man says, 'What …'

'You don't want to try to form sentences now,' Bess says. 'I know how you're feeling. We practice this on each other during training. Thinking is like swimming in cotton fluff, so don't bother trying. Just veg out. Take the day off. You'll be back.'

'What. Happened.'

'My guy …'

'To,' the man manages. 'Your.'

'My?'

Clenched eyes. Focusing hard. 'Part … ner.'

'I came here alone,' Bess says.

Then he frowns, and stands. And looks at the room's door, which is still open. Just hallway out there, the far wall. Dark wood panelling.

He thinks.

Sometimes the Organisation sends one operative. Sometimes two. To an affair like this, knowing the stakes, commonly, two.

He can't leave his patient. But he goes to the door and leans out, looking down the hall. Back toward the open-plan lounge area. He thinks about what happened when he arrived.

He can't see the front door from here, not without going along and around the corner. But when he got here, it was standing open. Why would that be?

Someone arrived here before he did? Went in first?

He looks the other way down the hall, toward the rooms he already searched. He didn't see what he needed to see in those rooms. He looked right through it all. Gaines is around that other corner, still, ensnared and in pain and frantic, bellowing for his help. But for Bess, it's all pink noise. A dull worry. A nagging.

'I don't know,' he says to his patient. 'What happened?' He turns away from the door.

Red is standing behind him. In the middle of the room, upright, grinning like a ventriloquist's puppet, eyes wide open. Bess makes fleeting eye contact, and this time Red's eyes are open *all the way,* allowing Bess to see straight through to what's on the other side. Comprehension leaps out of the pit at Bess and grounds itself in the back of his skull.

He recoils instinctively, covering his eyes and breaking the connection. He stumbles backward into the hall, falling against the wall panels. His orange, crystalline shield fluctuates, panicking in its own way because of what just passed through it. Intermittently it turns impermeable, cutting off Bess's frantic breathing. Then it snaps off and dies.

Bess doesn't have the training to fully comprehend the idea complex he was just exposed to. He has practical skills in memetic offence and defence; he can administer the spiral treatment and others, and protect himself from certain attacks that would instantly incapacitate a generic human, knock them over like a domino. But he's a field operative, not a specialist, not a scientist. He doesn't have the mathematics. The scope of Green, alone, makes him want to vomit. It felt infinite. Can an idea be infinite? He was taught it was impossible. He feels like one of the men Louis Slotin irradiated, a Demon Core criticality witness. He knows he's dead. The only question is how long it's going to take.

Red advances, keeping his grin fixed on Bess. He seems to grow larger, and to sink backward into space, a hole where a human should be. Bess tries to scramble away down the corridor, but he can barely move. It's like a dream, it's like syrup. There is a creeping, staticky numbness in his hands.

He understands his error now. He might as well have tried to poison the ocean. When he closes his eyes for an instant, he sees the whole thing, Red's grotesque vision for the world, his/its immense, vicious promise. The rot is everywhere. Those hundred thousand infected are a foretaste. The spores are flourishing secretly in every aspect of reality: in people's lungs, in their minds, their words, their walls. Maggots and cancers and nightmares in the sky. How can anyone think like that? How can anyone want that?

'You –' Bess means it in the singular. He sees now. There's no distinction between Red and whoever that original human was. There's no one to rescue.

Red advances on him.

Gun. Bess's mind is disintegrating. But it gets that one word out. *Gun.* He fumbles for his holster, only then finding that the creeping numbness in his extremities isn't just affecting his hands; it's affecting his own ability to perceive them. He doesn't know that it's a minor antimemetic clouding effect. All he knows is that there's a stump at the end of his arm. Both arms. He shouts, miserably and helplessly. He manages to pull the gun out of its holster, and it falls to the floor, where all he can do is bat at it. Red laughs, and doesn't even bother to kick it away.

'The Organisation will stop you,' Bess manages, like a mantra. But he doesn't believe it. The idea they have to fight, the idea that Red embodies, is too big.

Red cocks his head, as if he knows the word 'Organisation' from somewhere. He says, 'Are they all as weak as you?' He concentrates.

Comprehension goes both ways. Bess dimly understands what Red represents, which means Red, in turn, dimly understands what Bess represents. Red perceives the power structures that sent Bess here. He perceives the shadows of the memetics engineers at the streaming services. He senses the outlines of the small pool of experienced, complacent executives at the Memetics Division headquarters, the ones who authorised Bess's operation. Their chief is named Czerny.

That's as far through headspace as Red can search, because that's the limit of the people who know about him, it, Red. That's the hit list.

A shadow blots the Sun out again, the same one as before, for longer this time. Red looks out through the window, giving it a curt nod, and it departs.

Bess slumps to one side, dead up to the shoulders now. Conscious that any of these words could be his last, he says, 'You think you're in control. But it's going to kill you too. We can get you out. You can help us contain it.'

Red crouches, still grinning. 'Look at me. *Look.*' Bess looks. He doesn't have a choice. It hurts. Red makes sure he is being heard loudly and clearly: 'No.'

A hundred thousand people isn't such a frightening number, yet. But the process is finding traction now, going exponential, and the hole in humanity only needs to double in size a few more times. Next year.

A shadow takes each of the memetics engineers aside and shows them where they belong. At his unrelated board meeting, Czerny becomes restless, and gets up and leaves. After a time his subordinates follow his lead.

And the memory of the operation dissipates, once again, like vapor.

III

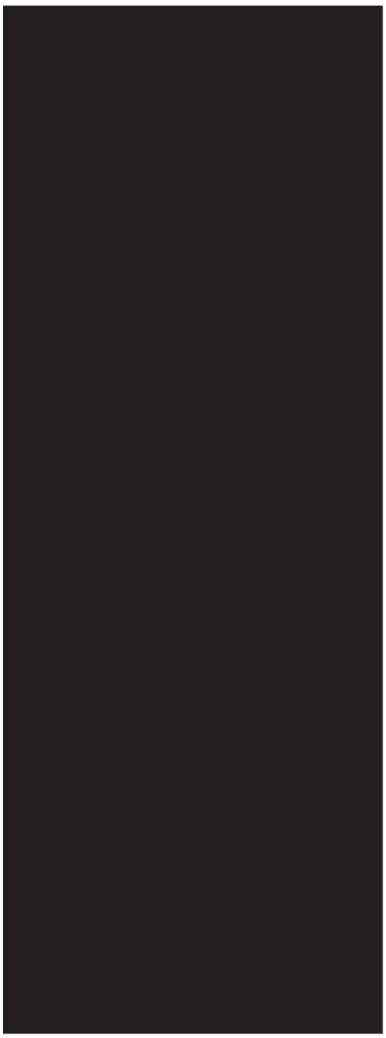
FIVE

FIVE

FIVE

FIVE

FIVE



1

Case Hate Red

If Adam Quinn gave it some thought, or if someone were to prompt him with the right questions, he could put words around the fact that his existence doesn't bring him any satisfaction. He would discover, on introspection, that he's nowhere close, actually, to 'happy,' and that there is something vast and significant missing from his life. But he doesn't give it any thought. There's a void between him and those questions. Objectively, academically, his life is great. As a professional violinist, he does what he loves the most for a living. He has talent, recognition, challenge, variety, applause, moderate wealth. What is there to question? Why shouldn't he love it?

During slower moments, there's a grey worry in the back of his mind. It's there in the minutes right after he wakes up in the morning, before he makes it to the shower; it's there in the dead times backstage when he can't use his phone and there's nothing to do but wait to go on. It perturbs him, from time to time, that he seems to exist in a kind of long shadow, cast by a vast class of thoughts that he is unable to think. But the rest of the time, on a day-to-day basis, his calendar is as busy as he and his manager can make it. He performs, solo and in orchestras, he records, he composes and teaches. Every week is a different challenge. He keeps busy, and the feeling goes away if he's busy.

On the morning of the day that ಽ arrives, while he is brushing his teeth, a tiny black slug falls out of the corner of his eye into the hotel sink.

'Mpfghl?'

He scratches that eye, while drooling foam from his toothbrush. He takes a close look at himself in the mirror. Yup: there's another, fatter one growing in there, its tail protruding from his tear duct.

‘I can do without this,’ he mutters to himself. He spits, rinses and then takes a pair of tweezers out of his wash kit. Carefully, he nips the tiny, waving end of the slug, and tugs it out. It’s no more painful than extracting a nostril hair. He drops it in the sink with its friend and washes them both away, along with the froth of toothpaste.

He stares at the plug hole for a long moment. It’s like he’s forgetting something. He can’t bring it to mind. He shakes his head, and goes to get dressed.

■

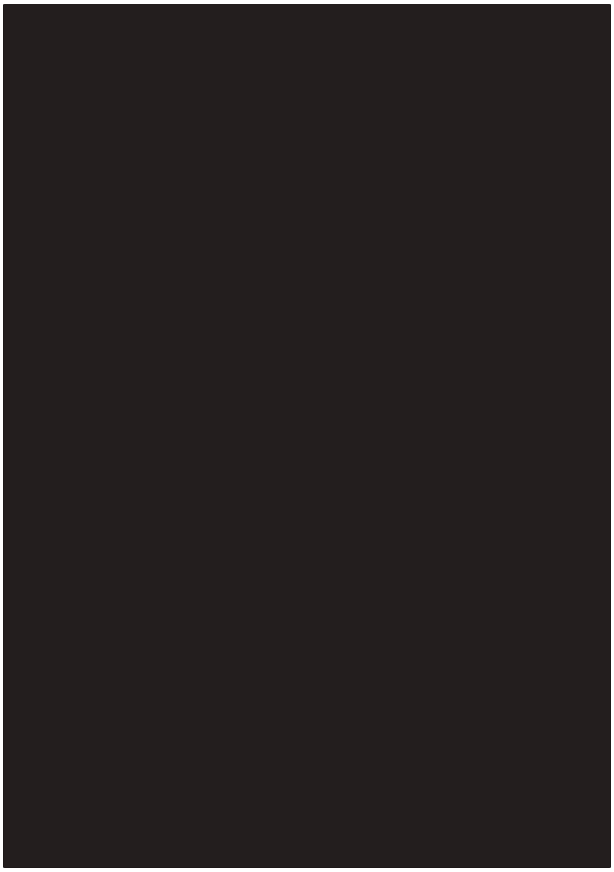
Quinn has been on tour with the New English Symphony Orchestra for nearly a month. They’re at their final venue, and it’s their final night, and Quinn has mixed feelings. Touring, for him, is an opportunity to explore a kind of liminal lifestyle, where he can suspend a lot of worldly concerns and just exist as a being who wakes, travels, performs and sleeps. But as novel as the experience is on paper, four weeks of it is gruelling. By this stage in the tour, even the most naturally cheerful members of the orchestra have begun to show frayed nerves, and the program has become stale and repetitious. It’s long past time for something else.

Last night, his manager left messages about plans for upcoming weeks. It’s probably time he paid attention to those.

Morning rehearsal starts at eleven. Quinn takes a taxi from the hotel to the venue, bringing his tuxedo and his violin with him. His violin is an heirloom, more than a hundred years old, and while he’s touring it never leaves his sight. (His tuxedo is just a tuxedo.) The concert hall is as close to the centre of the city as it gets, at the heart of a rat’s nest of busy roads, which means the taxi journey is a slog, even setting out after rush hour.

At the stage door, the place is in chaos, but it’s only the typical pre-show chaos that Quinn has spent much of his professional life navigating. He finishes a quick cigarette outside before joining the bustling flow of technicians, performers and administrative staff. He finds his way to his dressing room, changes, unpacks his violin and tunes it. He flicks through tonight’s music, more out of boredom than a need to refresh his memory. He has the whole program memorised. He’s always had a very good memory.

With some minutes to kill, he checks the headlines on his phone. Yet again, something dreadful and new that he doesn't understand is going viral. Today's fad is, you paint a black vertical rectangle on the wall, or on a mirror, or over the top of a picture. And then you chant something. Quinn can't quite pick out the words of the chant. They're in a language he's not familiar with. He's no singer, but he's performed pieces with lyrics in Latin, German, Greek, French … whereas this language has a bizarre, manufactured sense to it, as if it were simply English with the vowels and consonants all switched around.



Quinn plays decently during rehearsal. He swore, long ago, that he would never coast through a performance. But it seems to him as if a lot of the orchestra is distracted. Some cues get missed. He makes meaningful eye contact with the conductor a couple of times, and they share a frustrated look. When they break for dinner, late in the afternoon, the conductor, whose name is Lourenço, privately remarks to him, 'Their eyes need fixing.'

Quinn doesn't wholly follow. He rubs his own eye with a finger, reflexively. The memory of the morning tries to punch through, but fails. 'You mean, laser surgery?'

Lourenço responds with a few incomprehensible syllables and stalks away.

■

The auditorium opens and the seats fill. As ever, there's a brief, grey dead time while Quinn waits for all the machinery of the performance to spin up. The anxious feeling is stronger than usual today. It grips him, an uncharacteristic urge to run away. *Sure,* he thinks. *I could just junk my career, right now. Pack it in and make for the stage door. Maybe the taxi'll still be there.*

But he pushes through it. It's just a juvenile fantasy. It's been far too long a tour. One more show and it's over.

And finally it's time, and he's out there, under the spot, in his element. The first piece of the night is Shostakovich. Its first movement is a sedate, haunting, almost melodramatic nocturne, but before too long the concerto changes gear and becomes energetic, discordant, feral. It's lengthy, too, a real workout, and much of it is brutally difficult to execute. He's on form tonight. Close to flawless, and his audience – which he cannot see or hear – seems rapt.

Four-fifths of the way through the piece, a kind of spell breaks. Something changes in the atmosphere of the auditorium. The temperature in the huge room seems to rise by several degrees. More concerningly and noticeably, the music behind Quinn begins to trail off. The conductor stops too.

Perplexed, Quinn continues to play for a moment or two, keeping to his own internal time. But after another moment it becomes clear that something is wrong, something that everybody can see but him. He steals a glance up from his instrument, and finds that Lourenço is staring at him. In fact, every musician in the orchestra is staring at him, all of them wearing the same expression of stony, barely contained ang –

They've been replaced.

The orchestra is gone. All seventy of them. The things that have replaced them are not human but alien, ill-proportioned pillars of pinkish-brownish flesh. Each has, at its top, a heavy protuberance studded with goopy biological sensors and rubbery openings and, sprouting from the very cap, lengths of various kinds of vile, off-coloured moss. They are draped in black and white fabrics, weirdly cut to either conceal or highlight their blobby, inconsistent body structures.

Quinn reels with fright. He almost falls off the front of the stage. His stomach convulses and he wants to vomit, but a frantic fragment of his brain hasn't panicked yet and tells him, *Wait. Nothing's changed. That's what humans have always looked like. Right? What's happening? What's wrong?*

He glances, petrified, out into the darkness of the audience. The silent energy radiating off them has changed. They've been replaced too, he knows. And they know he hasn't. That's what's wrong.

Clutching his violin to his chest, Quinn stumbles across the stage, past the conductor, toward the wing. As he does, the musicians rise slowly from their seats, letting their own musical instruments drop to one side or the other. Quinn trips over a cellist's music stand, recovers. The conductor is following him, with the other musicians close behind.

Quinn reaches the wing. There's a pair of stagehands there, waiting for him. They have the same placid, angry expression as everybody else, and the same set jaws. Quinn stops and turns back. His heart feels like it's going to take off.

Lourenço, or, rather, the biped that used to be Lourenço, walks right up to him. He is a little shorter than Quinn, but much heavier-set. Rooted to the spot, not thinking clearly, Quinn holds his violin up, as if this will shield him. The conductor takes the instrument from his unresisting hands and breaks its neck underfoot, perfunctorily, as if crushing a box for recycling.

Quinn backs off, hands raised. He bumps into the disapproving stagehands, who gently and wordlessly try to take hold of his arms. He shakes them off and is just able to twist past them. He dives into the warren of corridors backstage. And then he runs like hell.

■

Four floors up, in some remote, poorly lit corridor that hasn't seen regular use in years, he finds a bathroom. He goes in and throws up. This makes him feel a lot better. He washes his mouth out and then lights a cigarette, quickly filling the tiny space with a haze of smoke. That helps too.

The adrenaline has run out and his knees are still wobbling from climbing too many stairs. But it doesn't sound like anybody is closely pursuing him. So, in this safe moment, he asks himself a serious question: *Did I just have a panic attack?*

He doesn't know what a panic attack feels like. He has never, to his knowledge, had one. Having put so much distance between himself and the stage, what happened there feels like a crazed dream, a paranoid hallucination.

But … No. Lourenço broke his violin. That part definitely happened; he remembers it with distressing clarity. His relationship with Lourenço has never been much more than tepidly professional, but the man *was* a professional. To vandalise a precious instrument like that would be unthinkable for him, or anybody in the orchestra. There is something wrong.

With everybody.

Except him.

He flicks his cigarette butt into the toilet. He grips the sink, and looks at his reflection, and as his eyes slowly force their way back into focus, he realises, with some alarm, that what he is looking at is not his reflection. The mirror above the sink has been sloppily painted over with a tall, black, dripping rectangle. It's giving off heat; staring at it is like staring into an open oven. And he can hear a dull, grumbling, mechanical kind of noise coming from behind it. Like distant, muffled wood chippers.

He exits the bathroom and slams the door and leans against the far wall, watching the door, as if something could very well open it and come after him.

There was another one, he suddenly recalls. Another painted block, this one on the wall in his dressing room, right behind his chair, facing the back of his head. He should have seen it in the mirror whenever he was sitting there, but he didn't. And not only that, there was one in his hotel room. It was painted over the picture hanging over his bed. Did the hotel staff paint it? When, why? Why is he only remembering this now?

The viral video isn't new. Why did he think it was new? It's been circulating for months. For as long as he can remember. Forever. And – in every venue where he's been on tour, in every city, on windows and billboards, and in small rooms and liminal spaces, people have been painting these – doors –

There's a second half to each video. He remembers now. He watched it passively, over and over, and never saw it. Something comes through. It's been leaching into the background of the world this whole time, in plain sight, and he *couldn't see it, and it's here now –*

He's having a psychotic break.

No. That's not what's happening.

Something is trying to interfere with the way he thinks. The block symbol is jammed into his mind. He can't dislodge it. He can't think about anything else.

He looks back along the narrow corridor down which he just came. The darkness at the far end of it is yet another dark, vertical rectangle. He hears the footsteps of a multitude of people coming from that direction. Not running. Just walking briskly enough to harry him.

He needs to get out of the building. Get help.

The stage door.

■

He takes a confused zigzag route back down to street level. There's nobody in his way, and the stage door itself is unattended. He cracks it open.

Night has fallen since the performance began. There's a minor road right outside, behind the concert hall building, a yellow-lit cul-de-sac with a loading bay and some unattended trucks. There's a major road adjoining the minor road, rammed with stationary traffic. Some of the vehicles are indeed taxis, but all of them are unoccupied, and most have their doors left open. There are colossally tall, darkened figures stalking down the streets, so dark and slender that Quinn actually fails to notice them. There is screaming, a grotesque, awful screaming coming from many human mouths, coming from somewhere down the main road. But that's the only way he can go.

It's everywhere, his last sane splinter tells him. *Not just the concert hall. It's everyone.*

As he creeps toward the main road, someone, another occupied former human, pokes their head around the corner, then calls to others in the strange language, pointing him out. Quinn stops in his tracks. In another moment, ten or eleven non-people are advancing on him from the road. Two of them are carrying something with them, a limp, badly broken human – a normal human, Quinn realises with some shock, like him. The victim's heavy winter coat is torn open and his inner clothes are saturated scarlet. When the non-people carrying him catch sight of Quinn, they toss the man violently aside, into the street, where he lands in a pile against a car wheel. He grunts with pain as he lands, face down, and once he comes to rest he takes a deep breath and lets out an inhuman, traumatised cry. But he doesn't try to move again. The non-people ignore him.

Behind him, Quinn hears the stage door swing open again. He doesn't dare glance back.

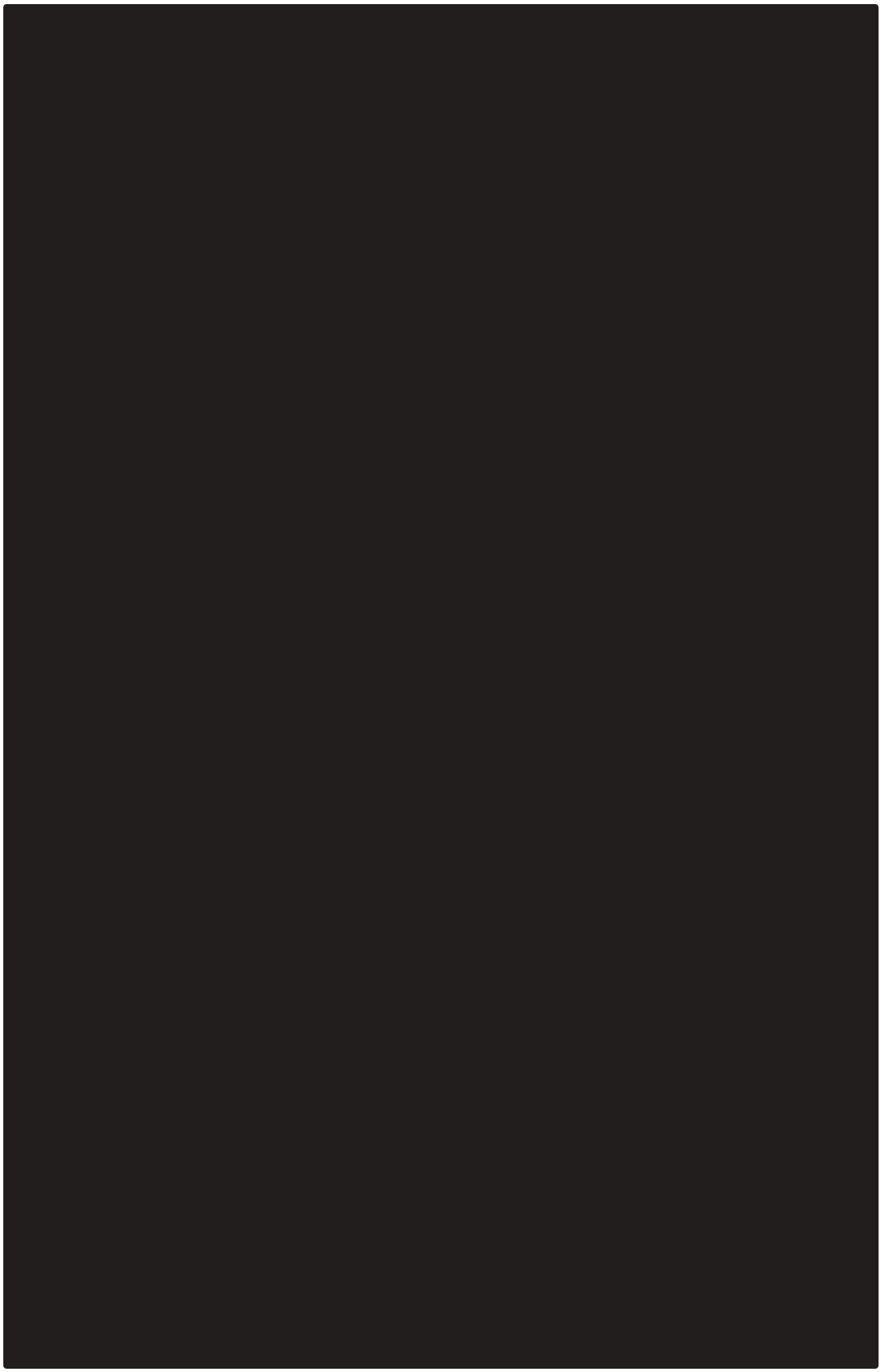
This can't happen, that last splinter says. *This is possible, yes, real things exist that can do this to the world. But it doesn't happen. There's someone whose job it is to protect us from this.*

Someone stops it from happening. Someone steps in. At the last minute.

But the last minute was a year ago. And she died.

'Help,' he says, to nobody.

A feeling of weightlessness rises up in his stomach. Gravity seems to upend and pitch him forward into the waiting arms of the non-people. They restrain him. They spend some time debating what to correct first, his eyes or his fingers. Right up until it starts, he's thinking, hoping: *Maybe it won't be as bad as all that.*



2

Unthinkable

But it is.

They wrestle him to the ground and pin his left arm out flat, forcing his fist open to give access to his index finger. The dread idea is beating on the door of his mind, demanding to be let in. It's wrong, the shape of it is awful and it's too big and slick with poison and he knows if he lets it in it'll swamp everything he is, filling his home up with sludge and broken glass. It wants to drown him in it and he knows it'll replace everything he is with itself. He knows it's taken the rest of the world already and all of the people around him, and he holds out, and he continues to hold out right up until one of the people pinning him produces a chisel [redacted]

overrides everything else [redacted]

[redacted] *Yes,* he says, *yes,* he throws the door open, [redacted]

Before [redacted] dawn, the world is ruined. [redacted]

ఎ is [redacted]

systematic, disciplined, ordered, [redacted]

[redacted] beautiful things, and smash them or cover them with filth. Find delightful people and disfigure [redacted] burn what is most precious and significant. Pour food into ditches, [redacted] Humiliate. Find loved ones, break [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] it wants [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] hated individuals, to exercise power over. [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] two groups [redacted]
[redacted] We, who are drowning in and driven by ఎ, who
radiate [redacted] misery [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] They, who number in the billions, and are [redacted]
[redacted] for the engine. [redacted]
[redacted] and awake enough to understand
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]

[redacted]
[redacted] Quinn, [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] was lucky, unbelievably
lucky, [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]

[redacted] build,
cement and wire [redacted] In the centre of the city [redacted]
[redacted] where people can be fed
in and the door locked [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] irreversible [redacted]
[redacted]

[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] intact, and watching, [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]

[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]

[redacted] this last splinter of
Adam Quinn [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]

[redacted] starts to work against that which it knows to be wrong. [redacted] a ray up there, a narrow yellow nourishing sunbeam. He follows it, [redacted] over the top of the walls. [redacted] and out of the city, [redacted]

[redacted]

And he walks, tottering under a black sun [redacted] away from the core. [redacted] A kind of thread unravels behind him, an infestation [redacted]

A black slug drops from his tear duct, falls to the asphalt, and shrivels. [redacted]

■

He regains consciousness on a hard, scrubbed floor in a wide, cool corridor. He is lying against one wall of the corridor, as if tossed there like a ragdoll, with his back to the wall and his right arm stretched out, clenched into such a tight fist that his finger joints are hurting. He releases the fist, gasping. Disoriented, aching, he rolls and plants his other hand on the floor, and it's then that he discovers what's happened to that hand.

He reacts as he must react. He clutches the stubs where his first two fingers were, and screams and cries hopelessly at the echoing building. Nobody answers him.

The last thing he remembers, he was playing Shostakovich. He was flying through it, unimpeded. In his mind, he can hear what he was playing, note-perfect, right up to the instant the memory cuts off. And he can't think of what comes next. Instead, that last incomplete snippet of music goes around and around in his head, abruptly ending mid-note and slowly fading

in again from a few seconds back, an earworm. He can't jolt himself out of it. He's a stuck record. He can never play again.

He tries to make the right shape with his remaining fingers. His hand won't do it. He rubs his eyes with his … his good hand. He feels rotten, hungover, dehydrated. His shirt is ruined, and his arms and chest are almost grey with muck.

He sits there, huddled, for a long while, being small and unhappy and lost. He knows he's going to have to move eventually. He's working his way up to it.

He looks up the corridor, eyes gradually recovering. He can see all right without his glasses, as long as he doesn't have to do much reading. He's in a school. There are noticeboards, banks of lockers, a rainbow mural. The place is deserted and silent. There is a dull red light coming through the windows in the classroom doors on the far side of the corridor, suggesting that the Sun is low on that side of the building, rising or setting. He has taught one-off music lessons in one or two schools, but he doesn't recognise this one.

With some unease, he examines his bad hand. The stumps of his fingers are lumpy and uneven and have healed badly. A mass of scar tissue and scabs, and no stitches in sight. As if the digits were removed with great imprecision. Hacked off. Or bitten off? It troubles him that he can't remember. His memory is normally so sharp and clear. He thinks he's thinking clearly, but when he concentrates and tries to access the lost time, something in that gap pushes him back. A fierce red heat.

It occurs to him that, though his severed digits have healed very badly, they *have* healed. They certainly aren't bleeding, although there's a continual ache. How long would that take?

How much time has he lost?

What the hell happened?

Way down the corridor, in the corner of his eye, he catches a glint of light. When he turns his head to look at it, he doesn't see anything, but when he looks away, it nags at him again. A persistent, irregular winking, like an unanswered message.

He doesn't have the willpower not to follow it.

■

It leads him to the school library.

It takes time for Quinn to figure out what he needs to do, that the light doesn't just want him here because this is a quiet, safe place. That it wants to be read to.

No, not those shelves. It wants nonfiction.

Quinn sits on a small chair at a small table and opens a sturdy hardback volume that would be almost too big for some of its intended readership to lift. It's an encyclopedia. It's a comfortingly straightforward read. Bright diagrams and clear language. He learns about pollination, and ancient Egypt, and how jet airliners work. There are topics in the book that he never covered in school, didn't encounter until later in life, and so only understands at a broadsheet newspaper sort of level. He learns about the genetic code, and GPS. He knew that Pluto wasn't a planet anymore – 'Very well,' he said at the time, indifferent – but now he learns that this is because it is, instead, a dwarf planet, and he learns about several other interesting dwarf planets.

He becomes, for a time, unironically engrossed. When he's finished he closes the book, and looks at its front cover again. He feels a little better.

He doesn't remember a word of what he just read.

'So,' he says, to the glint that read it all with him, over his shoulder. His throat is dry, he finds. He can barely speak. 'Is there an encyclopedia, somewhere, which you're in? A grown-ups' book, I mean. I suppose not?'

But it doesn't really know what he's saying.

'What are you? You seem … healthier, now.' He furrows his brow. There's a connection that he could make here, but he can't quite make it. He can't figure out that the sunbeam he's talking to eats thoughts, memories, interesting information. And that it was very, very hungry, desperate and bedraggled. And that it is sated now.

In fact, he did make the connection, quite quickly, but it ate that. And once the thought is gone, it's difficult to form the same thought a second time. Its tendency to eat the explanation for its own behaviour is part of what made it so difficult for the Organisation to contain, originally.

There is a document, though. Elsewhere in the world. Not exactly an encyclopedia entry, but all of U-4987's details are pinned down there.

'Are we done?' Quinn asks. 'You've had what you wanted?'

No obvious reaction.

'What happened? Tell me.'

Nothing.

Quinn stands up, swaying a little. ‘Fine.’ He blinks, tired, and goes to find water.

■

There is nobody anywhere in the school. Moving through the empty place, at this late/early hour, feels like a petty crime. There’s no power, and no running water. The school office is poky and dimly lit, piled high with paperwork. There are two small desks, each with a beaten-up office chair. There are computers that don’t work and desk phones, one off its hook. No dial tone from either of them. In the staff room he finds an unopened bottle of water and various pairs of spare shoes. He finds some trainers that fit. They’ll have to do.

There is no one outside the front of the school, either. Yellow zigzags where parents aren’t allowed to park to drop children off, traffic-calming measures, eerie bollards the shape and size of seven-year-olds. It feels like there’s no weather; no temperature, still air, no birdsong. The sky is a clear dark red. There is a faint hiss in the air, a distant white noise like the crashing of an ocean.

He follows that sound, dragged away from the school and downhill, out of that one suburb. He passes a bus stop, which informs him what town he’s in and how to reach the city centre. He walks that way. The sound gets louder that way. He reaches a main road.

There is scattered rubbish, broken windows, old remnants of fires. There are abandoned vehicles in the streets, a few with keys in the ignition. The invitation is there to steal one, but he’s not there yet.

‘So the place has gone to hell,’ he says to himself.

Adam Quinn has hiked, and camped. He has a few immediate ideas for finding food and water, and there is limitless shelter. But he was never a survivalist. He doesn’t know what he’d do if he had to put up a fight with someone.

There are no bodies, that he can see.

He walks far enough, and for long enough, to notice that the brilliant thing hanging low in the sky to his right isn’t rising or setting. Either the world’s stopped turning completely, or it isn’t the Sun. The sound in the

distance is starting to sound more like people. Thousands of voices, like a concert.

And then, after following the main road for some miles, he reaches the brow of a hill, and he has clear line of sight to what's beyond, another quarter of a mile away, at the bottom of the valley, at the centre of the city. He sees what's been built there, the gigantic, sprawling, windowless edifice. A sickening gulf opens up in the pit of his stomach, and he parses the sound that he's hearing, and he knows where everybody is. He remembers what happened, what *arrived.* The world has not ended. It has been remade, and it is continuing in a different form.

There is a tall, shadowed entity standing beside the sarcophagus. The sarcophagus is monumental, but the shadowy thing is like a skyscraper or a radio tower, tall enough that its upper reaches fade into the dark atmosphere. Quinn only notices it on his second glance, because the thing is so incredibly *thin.* But the thing, Quinn then realises with a jolt, is moving. Swaying. Maybe turning. It is far away, and moving slowly. It's not clear whether it's alive, or whether it has a head or eyes. It would need extremely good eyes to be able to make out something as small as Quinn from that distance.

Nevertheless, Quinn runs. Back down the hill, in terror, below its field of view. (There was another one behind it, which he didn't even notice.) After a few paces he veers to the left, into an open car door, and tries the ignition. Nothing. He gibbers. A flat battery? The next two cars he tries are dead too. He gives up, and continues to run, knees already starting to buckle. He doesn't know if anything is truly trying to catch him, or, if they were, how they'd be tracking him, or how to hide from that, or how to defend himself.

The sound seems to follow him, a roaring in his ears, a pressure in his skull, no matter how far he flees from its source. He tries to forget about it, to put it out of his mind, to think about something else. He can't do it anymore. It's here now.

■

Miles away, he raids a hypermarket for packaged food and water. With the power out, and only the 'sun' coming in through the front, it's a frighteningly ill-lit place, but he finds his way around. There's an aisle with

basic camping equipment. Elsewhere, to his infinite relief, a section with passable clothing. He finally throws his grey tatter of a shirt away. There's a display with mobile phone handsets and prepaid SIM cards. He finds a handset with enough charge to actually turn on. It has no signal, not even for emergency calls, and no working GPS, and it doesn't even know what the current date and time are. The thing is as useful to him as a house brick.

After assembling a backpack of gear, he finds a back room, a staff area with couches. Beaten-up but soft. He sits down, just for a second, to take stock. He experiences about an hour of deep, untroubled sleep, and ten of nightmares.

When he wakes up, his fingers are still gone, and it's almost as bad as it was the first time.

3

Blood/brain

There's no day/night cycle.

A few days into his trek, Quinn realises that he can perform an experiment. He selects a building with a high ceiling to sleep in, a local library. Before turning in, he sets up a Foucault pendulum. He suspends a heavy rock by wire from the ceiling and sets it swinging. The following 'morning,' the slow pendulum is still swinging, and it has precessed. It's swinging at about a right angle from the mark he made before he went to sleep.

That means the world is still spinning.

On reflection, he doesn't know if it proves anything. It's not clear whether the Sun or the Moon still exists, or any celestial object at all other than the red-black eye socket at the horizon. The eye never moves. It casts long, threatening shadows, while being bright enough to blind Quinn whenever he has to walk in that approximate direction, which is about half the time. Regardless of the physical evidence, it doesn't feel as if he's walking on a real Earth, or fully awake. He feels like an ant crawling across the face of a rough-hewn monolith, crawling into and out of the runes chiseled into the face of that monolith, runes that form an unstoppable, apocalyptic mythology. He has migraines, and there are blotchy multicoloured zigzags in his vision by the end of most 'days.' He feels as if the whole world is perpetually dropping away from beneath his feet, like he and it are both plummeting into an abyss.

On occasion, on the horizon, he sees a skyscraper-sized figure stalking past. He holds still, or hides, and it doesn't see him. Other than that, the world is seemingly deserted, standing empty, like an overturned car in a muddy ditch. Open doors, lights still blinking. Quinn feels … detached. Lucky. Guilty.

There are more sarcophagi, dotted around the country. He hasn't come within eyeshot of another one, but he can hear them from a long way out. They are in the city centres, the biggest ones, but there are others in the country, here and there. He plots long detours around them. The noise they broadcast is intolerable. The noise creates, in him, things that he dearly wants not to be flashbacks.

The sunbeam wants him to be somewhere. For lack of better ideas, he is trying to follow it. He is aware that the sunbeam is the reason he isn't still … one of … 'Us.' He is overwhelmingly grateful, and not able to communicate his gratitude.

Unfortunately, the sunbeam's navigation is erratic and unreliable. It weaves, and tries to lead him through hills, and sometimes disappears completely for up to a 'day' at a time. It has no conception of the paper road atlas Quinn is using, or roads in general. It just drags him in a general direction.

Quinn marks his journey on the map. There is, at least, some kind of route taking shape, an actual journey from an A to a B. He isn't going in circles. He's progressing. To what, he doesn't know. He almost hopes it's nothing. There's a bizarre pointlessness to it. Or, maybe, an inevitability to his failure.

He goes into a local shop and, along with more packaged food and bottled water, steals a cheap digital wristwatch. It has a date function. Today is the thirtieth of April; it's just gone lunchtime.

Time is still passing. On some level, all of this is factual. It's happening.

■

And if it's really happening, then what?

There is no longer any ambiguity about *what,* specifically, is happening. The world has long since passed through ಎ's antimemetic boundary layer and into its radioactive core. There is no longer a need for ಎ to pretend that it is not what it plainly is. What else could it be? What difference could it make now, what could oppose it? It stands there in plain sight. Quinn sees it. All of conscious reality sees it. It's happening everywhere, to everyone. It's not physically possible to conceive of anything else.

There is no worse-case scenario than what's happening now. There's no race against time; there's no ticking clock; there's no last second, the last second was years ago. There's nothing to *avert.* This is it, the final game position, the highest and most refined form of human civilisation. This is the shape of the next thousand years.

ವ stands there. Monstrous, casual and indifferent.

And Quinn is alone with his thoughts for a long period of time, and has little else to think about, and he wrinkles his brow, and he blinks a long blink, and looks again, and he realises what it was that he wasn't seeing –

ವ is *standing* there. Like a human stands.

■

The sunbeam is getting brighter. Anxious, maybe.

Quinn's body clock has wandered far out of skew. He's been living twenty- to twenty-five-hour days. It's technically around midnight when he first lays eyes on UO Wyeleigh.

There is a protective field surrounding it, stamped into reality by the detonation of the antimemetic warhead, radiating out a few hundred metres beyond the site's perimetre. It's a psychological repulsion, not a physical one. A thick bulwark of irrelevance. *There's nothing here. Just keep walking.* Quinn succumbs to the effect. Thirty minutes' walk down the road, U-4987 – Quinn doesn't know its number, but he has decided, again, independently, to call it 'Sunshine' – makes him double back. This happens two more times. On the fourth pass, after triple-checking the gap on his map, he manages to make himself see the extra road, leading in the other, *other* direction.

After a few hundred yards, there is a tall, intimidating security fence, and a security checkpoint. The checkpoint is unattended and the gate is standing open. Quinn proceeds along the road, to the main part of the site.

There is no ancient, dramatically overgrown ruin. The containment breach that led to the installation's destruction only happened a few years ago, and the bomb blast that concluded the outbreak was figurative, not physical. About a third of Wyeleigh's main building has been torn down, but the rest is perfectly intact and unmarred. Mother Nature has not

reclaimed it. Gnarled trees are not sprouting from the damaged side. It is, simply, an office building.

He walks all the way around it. There are several more buildings, plenty of parking, an armory (buried in rubble), a garage (intact). There's even a pond. There is a still, safe atmosphere about the place. It's as if Wyeleigh has its own cool microclimate. It's quieter, easier to think. Even the light here is fractionally yellower, more natural.

The main entrance is sealed with steel doors, but Quinn is able to effect entry through the damaged side of the building, over the rubble. He moves at a medium-slow pace. He can't afford to blunder into anything, but if he goes too slowly, he knows, he'll overthink the situation and become scared, and have to retreat all the way out of the building. Sunshine wants him inside. There is, he can only infer, something it wants to show him.

Or someone? It occurs to him that he hasn't seen any signage indicating *whose* site this is. The place is clearly intended to be secure and/or secret. It was inordinately difficult to find, even with Sunshine steering him in the right direction.

A secret organisation? A government agency?

A thought occurs to him. He says, 'Is this … where it came from?'

After creeping a little farther into the building, torch aimed forward almost in self-defence, he adds:

'Is this where it escaped from?'

He is figuratively, technically, close to correct.

There is a low shape in the dark. It is a corpse, seated against a corridor wall. It's clutching a combat knife, which it seems to have buried up to the hilt in its own inner thigh, opening a gushing artery. Quinn backs up against a wall, unable to look closely at the body but equally unable to let it out of his eyesight, in case it … does something. He feels faint. It doesn't help that at exactly that moment, the fluorescent lights in the corridor come up, triggered by his movement, giving him a much better look at the scene. The scene is about as bloody as any suicide can be.

'No. No, thank you,' he says. He backs up. He backs all the way up the corridor and through the ruin to the virulent red place that passes for daylight, and there he throws up.

■

He goes back to the pond, where there's a bench he can sit on. He feeds Sunshine: he pulls his book out, a famous director's autobiography, and reads another half-chapter. It's not like normal reading, it's a passive act, walking his eyes across the words. The words just fall into him, into blank space, snapped up and unremembered. After that, he eats something himself. He is procrastinating.

'Is there any way at all that you can tell me what it is you're taking me to?' he asks Sunshine, pointlessly. 'Just … release some of the tension? And, I don't like to ask the seethingly obvious question, but: What *is* this place?'

Nothing.

In the end he goes back in because he doesn't have an alternative. Ignore Sunshine forever? Lie down and die? He read, once, about a scientific experiment where subjects were left alone in a room with nothing but a bare metal contact. The contact, they were told, would give them an unpleasant electrical shock if they touched it. Most of the subjects, after a sufficiently long and boring wait, touched it. They received the promised unpleasant electrical shock. Quite a few of them touched it a second time.

Well, Sunshine doesn't seem to be scared. That, he hopes, means something. He, for one, is jumpy as hell.

He finds more bodies. There aren't as many of them as he expected, given the size of the building. Some of them are in groups, having died during violent altercations, or during more complex scenes that Quinn cannot fully parse. Some of them are dismembered, or just scattered pieces. Some of them appear to have been dead for significantly longer than the rest; they are little more than wafer-thin skin wrapped around skeletons, and there are strange things written on the walls beside them. He never works out why.

At first, nearly every door he meets is locked. But he steels his nerves, and returns to each of the deceased staff in turn, and retrieves their keys and security passes. After most of a day of work, he has the run of the place, with only a few highly secure control rooms denied to him.

The passes have names on them, and coloured stripes indicating seniority, but no company logo or anything else to indicate who the people actually worked for. The deliberate anonymity is actually becoming borderline obnoxious. Does this organisation simply have no name?

'You fellows are *evasive.*'

There's still power. There's running water. An agency with *some* degree of competence, at least. An agency that builds things to endure. The people are absent, but the physical systems they built are still here, and functioning, and ready.

He finds the Passive Containment Archive. Most of the vaults are locked, some are standing open and seemingly empty. Vault 4J reportedly contains U-2200, an ancient Malaysian antimemetic demigod interred in a stone idol. But the rock is silent.

After some exploring, he discovers vault 601, which is not the largest of the vaults, but clearly the most heavily secured. Its airlock is locked tight and requires an extreme level of authority to open, an orange and red pass that Quinn does not have. The files state only that this is where U-3125 is contained. He does not know what this signifies.

Near the site entrance – he can't figure out how to unlock the steel doors, even from the inside – he finds a security office, with printed floor plans of the whole site. He crosses off the rooms he's visited, and the rooms that are destroyed. Everything remaining is locked. Aboveground, anyway. Underground, there are warrens of tunnels, and dozens more containment units. And, thirty floors belowground, a single incredibly large vault of unstated purpose.

This final vault draws his attention in, magnetically. This, he knows in his bones, is where Sunshine wants him to go.

As the freight elevator descends, Quinn finds that a kind of anxious pressure is building above him. The air is rapidly getting warmer, and he suddenly realises that if the elevator breaks down right now, he'll likely be helplessly trapped, and die. He shouldn't have used it. He should have used the emergency stairs. Too late.

The elevator lands. There's an empty corridor. He follows it, drawn forward. There's an airlock at the far end, a wall of white metal big enough to drive a truck through. The airlock is closed, but there are seven or eight overlapping circular holes punched through it, making a combined gap that is easily big enough to admit a human. Beyond the airlock, there is a vast dark space. Quinn has climbed through the hole and walked five paces out into the darkness before he even thinks about what he's doing.

There are shapes out there, illuminated by the scant light falling from the airlock corridor – lumps that could be more dead people. Quinn's own shadow blocks much of the light. He takes out his torch. It is absolutely

silent down here, and the temperature is uncomfortable, making him sweat. The rest of the huge vault, as far as he can shine his light, is totally empty – but his torch is not powerful enough to illuminate a space this big, so it's hard to be certain.

He almost trips over something in the darkness. A shiny black chunk of metal, a mass of erratic pipework well over a metre long. At one end it has what is clearly some kind of stock, and some kind of trigger. And, at the other end, two long tines. A weapon. It is, he will discover later, U-7381.

He steps over it. He advances. A loud tone is building in his ears as he gets closer. Sunshine is getting brighter, agitated, a gold-white glare in one of his eyes. He shouldn't be here.

There are … he counts … twelve dead. Eleven of them dead in a rough circle around a twelfth, a woman lying flat on her back. Just outside of the circle, there is a military truck with the inert remains of a complex machine mounted on its back. There is a cable leading down to a control unit lying on the floor, under the hand of the dead woman. It doesn't look *quite* like a ritual. It looks somewhat like a murder.

He whispers, to himself, 'Was this where it happened?'

She has her hand on the switch.

'Was she the one who did it? Or did she die trying to stop it?'

In her other hand she is clutching an autoinjector, a fat white pen-like device with a luminous orange vial inside it. It seems important. Gingerly, he prizes it out of her grip. Sunshine glows painfully when he tries to take a closer look, but he can see that the cap is still on the syringe, and the vial is full. If the woman intended to use it, on herself or any of the others, she failed.

Her security pass looks different from the others. It has a bright diagonal stripe across it in red and orange. He takes it. He can't see it clearly at first; Sunshine is disturbing his vision too much now. He squints. The roaring in his ears is making it hard to think. The card says, MARIE QUINN / SITE DIRECTOR.

He stares at it, unable to say anything, for a long time.

It is, of course, a terribly commonplace name. If he stopped to gawp at every other Quinn he met, he would never get anything done. But Sunshine led him here. Pulled him out of the inferno and led him, determinedly, across an apocalypse, here. To her. Truly: what are the odds?

'Why?'

Sunshine is losing it. It's flickering, like it's going to explode.

'Who is she?'

It is an abstract being, with an uncertain beginning and end. One-of-a-kind, endling, lifecycle-less – it cannot explain itself in human terms, it cannot explain how *he* knew her, only how *it* knew her, through the memories it absorbed/ate/stole. It splits open, and those memories burst from its core, bathing Quinn in light, blinding him. Little items set down and then misplaced, earrings, teaspoons, ballpoint pens. Forgotten nooks, ill-tended plants, volumes of historical and sports trivia, crossword clues, facts and figures. Cigarette after cigarette. Moments of love and fear and burnout and anger, of duty and determination and, fleetingly, even peace; interesting word definitions, old friends' faces and phone numbers, concerto performances, plot twists, shooting stars, rare bird sightings, foolish personal aphorisms. The memories are out of sequence. Quinn sees himself in them, everywhere. He sees himself through another pair of eyes, doing ordinary, momentary things. Trimming his nose hairs or fumbling his way through the mortgage spreadsheet or picking out wine or just standing close, talking to her, stroking her behind the ear. Everything overlaps, everything crashes into everything else. The picture show is too much, and it's too beautiful and too rapid to follow and it hurts to watch and he doesn't want to watch it, but he doesn't have a choice. There's nothing else.

He doesn't recognise a single image. He doesn't remember. The show illuminates nothing, awakens nothing. It's fiction to him, a secondhand telling, a wonderful, unbelievable myth. Someone else's story, not his, not anymore. It's gone. It was taken.

It's over. Quinn finds he is on his hands and knees, eyes screwed up. Sunshine raises a despairing wail. It wants her back. There's no way he can explain to it that neither of them can have her back, ever.

There was one particular scene in the reel. An image, flying past with a thousand others in the midst of the stream, but final, chronologically. A scene in a Humanoid Containment Unit, with the three of them. Quinn seizes on it. It's important. To Sunshine, he says:

'You did this to me?'

Nothing.

'*She* did this to *us*? To protect me? What … damfool … *calculus* is that?'

It shares with him its baying fear, its panic. The thing was going to annihilate him. There were no other options.

‘I don’t accept that,’ he says. ‘And just how was *this* supposed to be better? She lost everything anyway. Everybody did.’

He scrabbles for the dropped pass again, grips it in his good fist.

The red and orange stripe. Asinine ‘seniority.’ He raises it over his head, ready to throw it at the ground, break it in half. But he hesitates for a long, long moment.

He doesn’t *not* believe in impossible choices, no-win scenarios. He believes that, truthfully, shit happens. He doesn’t think of himself as stupid and he doesn’t like to think he’d choose to spend his life with someone stupid and maybe, *maybe* he’ll accept that there was genuinely nothing else for it, and he and she and Sunshine took the only option open to them in the circumstances, and there really was no choice at all. But what he does believe is that there’s more to it. Always, or nearly always. Another level to any bloody scenario. A reason for the scenario.

He says:

‘*It.* Did this. To us.’

You throw the lever or don’t, hit one person with the trolley or let five other innocents die, and maybe that’s murder, and maybe that’s something that’s going to stay on your conscience or stain your soul for all eternity. But *someone* put you there, alone and helpless, in front of the lever. Someone set you up, someone tied those people to the tracks.

There is a containment unit that this pass, and only this pass, will open. It might all still be hopeless; he’s trying not to fool himself about that, still. But he will, at least, find out what the thing is that did this to them. To everyone.

He is owed an explanation. He already has its number.

4
U-3125

‘And as years pass, the manifestations will continue, growing denser and knitting together … until the whole world is drowning in them, and everybody will be screaming …’

Quinn has watched this recording multiple times now. He mouths the words along with her: ‘“Why did nobody realise what was happening?” And nobody will answer, because everybody who realised was killed, by this *system* …’

He skips forward.

‘Three years ago, UO Antimemetics was a mini-Organisation of more than four thousand people. Today, we are ninety people. Tomorrow it’s going to be fewer. Our original headquarters is gone. Obliterated from our collective memory. No one remembers!’

Forward.

‘There’s a machine we could build. All it would take is twenty years, a lab the size of a country, and all the money in the world.’

He skips forward again.

‘I don’t remember the last time I slept without having a nightmare about Adam –’

He stops it.

Then he plays the other recording. The recording that was recorded as a response to the first, by a very different Marie Quinn. One with no one left to lose.

She takes a second to start talking. She collects her thoughts, and does not find it easy to look at the camera.

‘I remember now. I don’t know why I remember *now,* but I remember that there is a disused heavy engineering lab beneath the Wyeleigh complex.

Vault B30-000. I don't know when it was built, or who built it, or what its original purpose was. No one has gone down there in living memory.

'My belief is that there are good reasons for those gaps in my knowledge. I believe that this vault was originally constructed to house a long-term project where Dr Edward Hix would construct this machine. *That* machine.' She points off-screen, at an area of wall.

Adam Quinn has already found that area of wall. He's retrieved all of those schematics. He holds up the paperwork, demonstrating that he is following her reasoning. The machine is called an 'irreality amplifier,' and he doesn't have a clue how it's supposed to work.

Marie continues. 'While that's been going on, the rest of the Antimemetics Division has been fighting an unconscious war in order to buy time. We have been, inevitably, losing. But we have been losing as slowly as humanly possible.

'Now, today, the time we have bought is up. It is, I will concede, an extremely bad sign that nobody inside B30-000 has broken the seal yet, but there is no ground left for us to cede, and there are no more bodies to throw into U-3125's maw to slow it down. It's here, ready or not.

'I'm going to go to B30-000 and use the machine. I think I can get the information out through the airlock. I think I can get to the vault alive. This was the plan. It's become garbled in the retelling because of variables, but I know that this was my plan, because I know myself. What else could it have been?'

Adam is verifying all of this against his notes. He nods.

Now comes the important part.

'Standard procedure is that I have to tell you what to do next if this doesn't work. That's the asynchronous research covenant.

'But I don't have a good picture of who you can even be, watching this and alive. In your scenario the vault is empty, there's no amplifier, Edward Hix is missing, I'm dead, this site is ruined, and – how would you even get in here? Are you UO? Are you conscious? Is there a single word of this that you comprehend?'

'One or two,' Quinn murmurs.

'You live in a world bathed with U-3125. That's the loss condition. I can't help someone who doesn't exist. Unless …'

She regards the camera for some time, lips tightened into a grim line. Then she terminates the recording.

Quinn flips through his notes one last time. He takes a deep breath, and starts a recording of his own.

'You've been extremely helpful, in fact. You've given me the answer. I say "you," but I'll confess I don't fully know for whom I'm recording this. I found your body.'

He pauses.

'And I'm sorry.

'… You were right. About everything. It's here now, and what it's done to the world is frankly unspeakable. I'm still conscious. I think. I'm walking and talking. I might be the only one. I have seen neither hide nor hair of anybody else. At least, out in the open. According to my file – yes, I've found the files – the neurological condition I have, which protects me from this kind of mental interference, is very rare. Not totally unique … But how many other people have this U-4987 critter on their side as well? I looked it up. And like a lot of the things in your database, it seems to be one of a kind.'

Aside, he adds, 'I lost a lot of time in your database. That dry house style of yours makes for bizarrely compelling reading. I'm going to cautiously assert that at least half of the entries are disinformation, yes? They certainly can't all be true at once …

'I don't know what's happened to the rest of the Organisation. I found your communications room, and I'm … *decently* sure that I got the equipment properly operational. There were written instructions, some key frequencies to try in case of emergencies, that sort of thing. But, nothing. And I've been thinking about what that means. It's possible that there are surviving Organisation staff, in bunkers somewhere. Somewhere else. If I were them, I'd be refusing incoming calls, because it seems like this thing is an idea, and we all know that an idea can travel across a phone call. But the Organisation outside of your division didn't have your training, so I don't know if they'd have even thought to shut themselves away when U-3125 arrived, or even if they'd have bunkers, or the right kind of bunkers. So, I'd guess that most of them were pulled into the … mess, along with everybody else.

'Which doesn't necessarily make them dead. Most of the people in there are alive.' He shivers. 'But it does mean, it's down to me.

'So.

‘From the evidence I can see, this was never the sole Antimemetics Division site. There were others. I imagine they’re now all effectively invisible to (most) passersby, of course, just like this one, but I presume that they, just like this one, still physically exist. Your plan, I think, was in place for longer than you know. And since you weren’t at liberty to retain its details, you put it into action more than once.

‘Your original headquarters. Your base of operations, up at UO Stanmoor, sent to oblivion years ago. I have a map of the base, here in the older files. There was a vault there, just like this one and just like B30-000. Same airlock, same, ah, what was the terminology … “broad-spectrum informational cladding.”

‘Stanmoor is a nonentity, of course. It’s likely ruined, ruined a long time before *this* all happened, and it’s quite definitely a long goddamned way from here. You would never have made it even if you tried. But I know precisely where it is, and I think it’s better than half a chance.

‘I could die on this jaunt too, naturally. The world outside of here is a horror show, and nothing is simple. But I’ll give it my best shot. And whomever I’m speaking to, if anybody: Well, follow me. With care. I could be dead wrong.’

He pauses the recording.

He resumes recording.

‘You saved my life,’ he says. He wipes an eye. ‘I’m still here. I wish you were here.’

He stops the recording.

‘I’m so scared,’ he says.

■

As he moves down the forest road away from Wyeleigh, he approaches the edge of the antimemetic crater. He squares his shoulders, preparing to reenter the presence of U-3125. His inner ear starts free-falling again. The ambient light is reddening.

‘Where were you, just now?’ someone calls out to him.

He slows, and stops. He squints into the intense light ahead of him, shielding his eyes. He can just about make out a figure standing there. The trees on each side of them rustle and move. They’re too tall. Spider-

scrapers. A wave of dread hits Quinn, followed closely by one of perverse relief. In the back of his head, Sunshine trembles.

'Why can't I track you?' the unidentified man says. His voice sounds faint. 'You're so *weak,* it's like you don't exist. I just wasted two days trying to pick you up again. What's wrong with you?'

Quinn says nothing.

The man is closer. He didn't walk, but the distance between them halves, and his voice is easier to hear, though he is still too bright to look at. His body structure blurs and flickers. 'You're not one of Them,' he says. 'And you're not one of Us. And you're sure as hell not the *hero.* Maybe that's how you did it. You don't mean anything.

'Why are you wasting your time on this? Whatever the fuck this is. Kill yourself. It's not going to work.'

Quinn knows that.

The light collapses. The figure smashes into focus, becoming physical. It's a real human. A skinny twenty-something with scruffy, uncut hair and a sketchy beard. He is shirtless, and there is a deep, black pit in his clavicle, a hole where he has clearly been very badly wounded. Blood has run down his chest, soaked his jeans and forearms, and dried black. Fresh blood is still coming, building up thick layers, which shouldn't be possible. Quinn doesn't spot the second hole in his gut, obscured by too much blood.

Quinn is trying to keep his expression neutral, but he knows it isn't working. He can feel his left hand, his bad hand, starting to shake. He gets a tighter grip.

A part of him *still* wants to ask the man why. But there is no possible answer.

It's not going to work, Quinn tells himself. He got a fair distance, but surely the man is here to kill him now, and he will, at the instant that his curiosity ebbs. Surely, despite his protestations, the man can clearly see him, and what he's clutching in his arms. It's over. It was over a long time ago.

… And yet.

If he saw it, wouldn't he have been disarmed by now? They're at the edge of the crater. The man said he couldn't see into the blast radius of the … memory warhead, whatever it was.

He can't come any closer. *He doesn't comprehend.*

‘This is what our race really is,’ the man explains, spreading his hands to gesture at the whole world. ‘We lied to ourselves for thousands of years. But this is it. This is how it was always meant to be.’

‘That’s –’ Quinn begins, then grunts with annoyance, raises U-7381, and fires.

In the moment that Quinn takes to raise the weapon and take aim, the man begins to react. Quinn starts to act; he starts to mean something. Quinn comes into focus for him in turn, and Red starts to perceive what Quinn stands for in this scene, if weakly. At a step removed, perhaps; what Quinn stands *for* standing for. At minimum, he senses the outline of the weapon, what *it* means. But, at that instant, Sunshine has begun to move. It arrows forward, over Quinn’s shoulder, masking his intent with its own. The gun’s gleaming points are still rising toward horizontal, wavering as they rise, but Red’s attention splits.

Sunshine is personal. It is a being of raw memories, trivial factoids, small, human moments; Red is completely impervious to its attack. He dismisses it, snuffs it out with utter callous ease, a pinch of his fingers. But this means that he is distracted, turned partially away from Quinn, when U-7381 discharges. The weapon is absolutely silent aside from the *click* of the trigger. It’s a good shot. The front half of Red’s head disappears, and nine-tenths of his throat, and most of one shoulder. Red’s remains twist as they fall. He lands ‘face’ down.

Quinn has to turn away quickly from his work, gasping with inarticulate disgust. There is much, much more blood than he wanted there to be. He almost drops the gun. He gets a tighter grip on it, again. He turns back, and aims back at the bloody ruin of the man’s head. He wants to throw up. He controls himself. In through the mouth, out through the nose. He’s okay. Red isn’t moving.

‘I let him talk for too long,’ he says, apologetically.

Sunshine does not respond.

Quinn turns, scanning his surroundings. There’s nothing in the corner of his eye, or the back of his mind. Sunshine is gone.

Sunshine has disappeared before. It left him alone for long stretches during the march, but … Quinn plays back those two seconds of action, realising what happened. It was so quick. Uncaring, *easy.*

‘Oh.’

He doesn't know if Sunshine is dead. Organisation literature was unclear on whether the thing was able to die, or, for that matter, meaningfully alive. But it is gone. Does an idea die? Does it go somewhere?

It bought him the moment. Why?

He says, 'I feel that I should say a few words.'

But they do not come to him.

■

He uses the gun to erase the rest of Red's remains. He does this methodically, cleaning a large ellipse of the asphalt road.

He says, to the space, 'What I was going to say was something along the lines of: "That's a lie. That's what you are. You're the lie." But, ah.'

He looks up, hearing movement in the forest all around him. He realises that the immense spider forms – he'd sincerely forgotten about them, they were standing there so quietly – are dispersing.

The atmosphere, however, is not changing. The sky is not returning to blue. There is still that red eye/star, and that heinous pressure. U-3125 remains the dominant force in the world, and Quinn's objective remains: he must travel north, alone now, and find out what happened to the dubiously late Dr Edward Hix.

5

Wild Light

Twelve years earlier:

The meeting room is containment unit STM-00-1006, which is the skull of a stillborn *Cryptomorpha gigantes.*

The hollowed-out space inside the skull cavity is a prototypical Vegas room – a place where what happens, stays. People go in, they come out, their memories are sieved out of the universe as they leave and they remember nothing. The skull was acquired in the nineties. The information suppression effect is a byproduct of the species' natural antimemetic camouflage, a phenomenon that rendered the colossally tall creatures somehow nearly impossible to observe in the wild. It's a phenomenon Edward Hix and his team spent years figuring out how to replicate. They've got it, now. They can synthesise *C. gigantes* bone, extruding it in prefabricated pieces from steel grids. They can bolt the plates together to make hermetically sealed boxes. Passive memetic insulation, no need for complicated machines; it's got a lot of potential.

The skull is forty-five metres long, sixteen wide and fifteen tall. It resides at the centre of a vast purpose-built containment unit of its own, surrounded by the rest of the same *C. gigantes* individual's bones, laid out in meticulous radial patterns for space efficiency. The ossuary occupies about a third of the containment unit's floor area. The rest comprises immense industrial vessels that hold its harvested organs. Some of them are actual vessels, repurposed cargo ships loaded with brain matter and skin tissue. The unit is by far the largest single building at the Unknown Organisation base at Stanmoor.

The floor plan of the warehouse is clear enough, navigable if grim. But from ground level, on foot, the place is a vertiginous, intimidatingly macabre place, even fluorescent-lit around the clock. Hix walks down an

echoing canyon created by, on his left, a hundred-metre-long foreleg bone and, on his right, a blue steel container holding the creature's duodenum, including the germ farm. Ahead, the skull peers down the canyon at him, a distant yellow-white tower, fuzzed with scaffolding and disused scanning rig, its eye sockets vacant black.

As he walks, Hix has to remind himself continually that these are all the remains of a single organism, one of the tiniest examples of its species.

Behind the *C. gigantes* skull, where there used to be the creature's first neck vertebra, there is now a large compound mechanical airlock, a ramp and some steps, and a staging area. The staging area serves as a miniature customs desk, tracking every person and item entering and leaving STM-00-1006. Although memories are wiped on exit, written and electronic records emerging from the interior have to be handled manually. Standard procedure is for the first person exiting the room to bring written instructions for the Filtration Officer, telling them what other information from the room interior needs to be scrubbed, and what is safe to retain. Usually the list of information to retain is very short.

There are seats, scanners, a coffee machine, a trolley loaded with cleaning equipment and a stack of cages for the germs. Parked just outside of the staging area, there is also a limousine – bulletproof.

'Where's everybody else?' Hix asks the Organisation clerk who meets him, whose name is Fletcher. 'I'm not late.'

'This way, please,' she says, leading him to a seat near a scanner. Hix has gone through this procedure a dozen times now, so he knows to hold his left arm out. Fletcher tears the wrapper off a sterile bracelet-like sensor and clamps it around Hix's left wrist, then studies a nearby screen. 'They went in almost an hour ago,' she says.

Hix frowns. That's not usual. Why would they tell him a different start time? Why would they need an hour of preparation time before he showed up? 'Did they say anything?'

'Of course not.'

Hix hasn't the slightest clue what this meeting is about, or what any of the previous meetings were about, or even if they have a common topic.

Actually, he does have some clues. The timing of the meetings is one. The first took place early this year, and when they emerged, amnesiac, they were clutching written instructions from themselves to themselves to continue meeting monthly. Around July, the meetings became weekly. They

had three last week – he missed the last of them, he was on a work trip to China. And after Friday, they created a new schedule: they meet for ninety minutes every morning, starting today, Monday.

A more significant clue is the list of attendees. Other than Hix, three high-calibre researchers from his own organisation are in attendance, along with the directors of Wyeleigh, Northkirk and Stanmoor, the last of whom is Jason Lo, the Organisation's chief of Antimemetics and Hix's direct manager.

He steals a glance at the car parked behind him. There's also *this* one. Hix doesn't know for sure who the limo belongs to, but the list of people in the world who have the authority to drive a street vehicle into an Organisation containment building is extremely short. Someone from the C-suite is interested enough in their covert discussions to show up in person. This is a new and non-trivially alarming development.

He nods at the car. 'Shouldn't this place be lousy with private security right now?'

Fletcher shrugs.

'Anybody go into the unit with the C? Bodyguard? Anybody stay in the car?'

'No.'

Hix glances at the car again. The windows are tinted, though surely there's a driver behind the wheel, at least. But where's the real protection? Maybe it's all invisible. Microbes. Occult spells of warding. He feels like the car is watching him back.

'Open your mouth, please.' Fletcher puts a disclike cap on Hix's head, presses an emitter to the roof of his mouth, and fires two pulses of radiation through his brain. 'Any psychic intrusions?'

Muffled by the emitter, Hix manages, 'Uh-uh.'

She pulls out the emitter and discards it. 'Did you experience REM sleep in the past twelve hours?'

He wipes his mouth. 'Yes.'

'How many digits do you have?'

'Ten.'

'Count them for me, please.'

Hix spreads his fingers and counts them. 'One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten.' His right thumb is 'five.'

Fletcher injects him with a substance that will prevent his body from rejecting the germ, then lifts a germ out of one of the cages. It splays its tendrils out, confused about being picked up. ‘Tilt your head back and look at the ceiling, please. Eyes wide open. And, if you could take off your glasses.’

Hix obliges, handing his glasses to Fletcher for scanning. ‘I dislike this part,’ he states.

Fletcher has no comment. She lays the germ over his eyes, like a sleep mask. There’s a cold, sludgy sensation as it wraps itself around his chin and hair, then the tendrils meet behind his neck and begin knitting with his spine. Hix sees darkness for a few worrying seconds, then a circular indentation forms in the germ’s hide over the top of his right eye, and there’s a feeling like part of his brain dislocating, and a fake eye opens where his real one would be. The fake eyeball is around four times the size of his own. Though it is singular, its four pupils grant him decent depth perception, and he can see a little way into the ultraviolet.

The germ was originally part of this *C. gigantes* specimen’s gut fauna. The stillborn creature had a small but flourishing population of them, and the Organisation managed to save them for study. The germ, whose neurological layout has some disturbing similarities to a human’s, is acting as an external block of short-to-medium-term memory, and as a proxy between the conscious Ed Hix and the real world. When the meeting is over, the germ will be removed and incinerated, along with all memory of the meeting.

There are other amnestic approaches – gas, injectable drugs, surgical techniques, occult rituals. These are safe, proven technologies for mass use on the general public and Organisation staff alike, but they all operate on the same essential principle that the unwanted knowledge has already entered the mind and must now be removed or suppressed after the fact. Such procedures are imperfect. Memory removal can leave critical fragments behind, occasionally enough for people to rebuild dangerous wholes; and mnestic technologies for causing suppressed memories to reassert themselves are continually advancing. The Class Y family of biomnestics is promising to render all after-the-fact memory erasure techniques irrelevant. The only amnestic defence against the completed Class Y will be decapitation. So, if there’s advance warning time, it’s better to physically compartmentalise, to airgap; to outsource the memories to

another organism entirely and never let them touch your own mind. You can't be forced to recall something that you genuinely never experienced.

Class Z carries an entirely different class of problems with it, of course.

It's a complex and dynamic field, one of several fields in which Hix is a world expert. There are machines that could perform the same task as the germ, silicon modules you wear like a headset, plugged into a surgically implanted jack behind your ear, but Hix would rather die than submit to interfacing his brain directly with a computer, especially an Organisation-made computer. Nobody is getting his brain waves. When he joined the Organisation, thirty years ago, he put a DNU in his will – Do Not Upload. Everybody thought he was crazy.

Of course, using both the germs *and* a Vegas room feels rather like overkill. That's another clue.

'Your belongings have been scanned,' Fletcher tells him. He refills his pockets and takes up his laptop. Walking slightly unsteadily because of the new weight he's carrying on his head, he climbs the stairs to the airlock.

■

Hix would be the first to admit that a typical Organisation staff member has appalling taste. A typical Organisation staff member picks brutal functionality over aesthetic pleasure one hundred times out of one hundred, and a depressing percentage of Organisation staff don't even comprehend the distinction. Hix sees this reflected in the architectural choices and interior design of the Organisation's buildings and offices, and in its labs and containment facilities, which commonly cultivate a hopeless, bleak-cliff-edge atmosphere. He sees it in its machinery, its devices, its tools and even its font choices. Hard edges, clashing colours, failing aircon, impersonality, clutter, claustrophobia.

And so, STM-00-1006's interior is a surprise and a delight. Hix actually sighs. It seems like someone hired a designer. The place is spacious and modern, well lit, with select walls painted in bright secondary colours. There's not a bit of exposed concrete in sight.

STM-00-1006 isn't a single space but a self-contained suite laid out on two floors. There's a central meeting area with a double-height ceiling, a long oval table and Herman Miller chairs. Along the left wall there are

smaller breakout meeting rooms with frosted glass walls and doors. Above those, reached by a flight of stairs, there's a kitchen area, and in the back are some additional rooms, restrooms and storage. The carpet is grey and orange, a non-repeating hexagonal pattern. The place is well ventilated, and smells of coffee.

Right inside the door, Marie Quinn is waiting for him, holding two steaming cups of coffee. She was recently made deputy chief of Antimemetics, and she and he go way back. She hands one of the coffees to him immediately as he steps in. He takes it, automatically. 'Oh. Legendary. Thank y – Aah. Yes.' He sees that she is wearing a germ on her head, just as he is. The effect is very disconcerting and he comes close to spilling his drink. 'Aha. I try to prepare myself, but it's always the first time, isn't it?'

She asks, 'How was China?'

'Is there a point in making small talk? We're just going to have the same small talk all over again the second we leave.'

'Ed, a friendly conversation is its own reward.'

He sips his coffee. 'Okay. Do you know Gödel's first incompleteness theorem? In mundane terms, it states that there are some statements of mathematics that are true but can never be proven. Xie, who's the UO China lead containment architect, was telling me that if you extend that concept from mathematics to the real world you get an assertion that some physical realities are just going to be *there* and scientifically unjustifiable. Inexplicabilities. Like there's going to be a wall we hit one day, where all the remaining Unknowns are just going to be fixtures, permanently Unknowable, and we'll have two options: give up and live our lives, or die trying and failing to know them. Which I thought was a thought-provoking take, because a Gödel sentence –'

'Ed. Small talk?'

He stops. He starts over. 'China was fine. How are you?'

'I'm fine,' she says.

'Weren't you also … uh, out? For a few weeks?' Hix isn't very good at remembering information about people.

'Adam and I went to Italy. It was our anniversary.'

'Great. How was Italy?'

'Only had to fly back to take care of an emergency once,' Quinn says, with a pained smile.

Hix spends a moment trying to figure out how to react to this, but before he can he is interrupted. There are three other people in the room, also wearing germs. Devlin, director of UO Northkirk, is at the main table, a very gangly and severe man, hunched over a laptop. And at the back of the room, Jason Lo is chatting with a man Hix does not know: Mahlo, director of the UO in the United Kingdom and Ireland.

He must be the C. It's strange. In Hix's mind, Cs are titans, epic men and women with authority blanketing the whole globe. But Mahlo is a basic little fellow of sixty or so, someone Hix wouldn't look at twice, or even once, if he passed him in a corridor. Hix tries not to stare, but his own germ is extremely good at staring.

Mahlo catches his eye. 'You're here. Shall we begin?'

'Ah. Yes … "sir"?' Hix doesn't know how to address him. 'I'm guessing you're all caught up.'

The nature of the asynchronous work loop is that the first part of any meeting in a Vegas room is spent reading notes left from prior meetings. Hix's correct guess is that there was an hour-long pre-meeting, and then everybody broke for coffee, and now they're resuming.

Mahlo takes a seat at the head of the table, with Devlin to his left. Lo sits to his right, and Quinn to Lo's right. Mahlo indicates a particular vacant chair, opposite Quinn, where a printed document is waiting for Hix to read it.

Hix sets his laptop down, hesitant to approach the document. 'You want me to read this now?'

'Take as long as you need.'

'Do we have quorum? Where's my team?' Hix asks. 'We're three bodies short.'

'Read the document, Dr Hix,' Mahlo says. He seems upbeat. Perhaps he's projecting an upbeat facade to help Hix to forget exactly how much authority and power he wields. C-suites' net worths are said to be essentially infinite. It's not really about money at their level. Mahlo, and his kind, can do *anything*.

Hix sits, and reads.

The document is a scientific paper purportedly authored by Hix himself, with various of his fellow researchers co-authoring, including two who should be in this room now. Hix doesn't recognise the paper's title or content, but that's nothing special in his line of work. The text is written in

his own formal, academic style, so he has no reason to doubt its authenticity.

It's a brisk read, very dense and to the point, written for a target audience of other memetics scientists. In the abstract, it announces the observation of a new, titanically powerful and dangerous (anti)memeplex, provisionally designated U-3125, for which the authors plan to seek Γ_0 categorisation.

'Hmm.'

The main body of the first page describes eight different phenomena, most but not all of them anomalous, most but not all of the anomalous ones controlled by the Organisation and having U-designations. From a cursory glance, the phenomena appear to be totally unrelated, either to one another or to the proposed U-3125. Hix suspects he could derive the implied link between them, given a few minutes, but elects to read on. He flips the piece of paper over. The whole document is just two sides of A4.

The other side is mostly mathematics. There is one graph, and one equation, and a brief technical description of two highly novel memeplectic transformation procedures, which the authors dub 'amplification.' Then there's –

Something like a jump scare in text form. There is a crucial logical leap, and for Hix, the arrival of comprehension is so blunt, so sudden and frightening, that it physically startles him. Even knowing that Γ was on the table, even primed to expect something extremely nasty on this side of the paper, he recoils. He hisses to himself: 'Oh, *fucking* hell.'

Nobody else says anything. They wait, expectantly, for Hix to gather his thoughts and draw some conclusions.

He reads the rest of the paper, figuring out what it's going to say almost live as he reads it. As he reaches the end, the initial shock hasn't worn off. The sheer scope of U-3125 is a significant distance beyond his current comprehension. He's had a glimpse of it through a keyhole. He would need time in front of a computer to play with the results to get a grasp of it.

No. He needs to build *filters* first, the equivalent of lead-lined gloves, to let him manipulate this radioactive idea complex with some degree of safety. He feels like *it* may have glimpsed *him*.

Category Γ is reserved for highly destructive active Unknowns that are functionally impossible to contain – something past ε. There are exceedingly few of them. A Category Γ Unknown is an Unknown more or less guaranteed to ultimately end the world, no matter what is done to stop

it. The only thing that can avert that particular scenario is if something else, likely some other Category *Γ* Unknown, ends the world first. Their relative threat levels are measured not in material containment resources but in inevitable years. The fewer, the worse. And, considered relative to the others he's cleared for …

'Yeah, this is it,' he says. It's bizarrely liberating. 'This is the one that's going to kill us.' He looks around the table. 'Did we obtain Gamma categorisation?'

'No,' Mahlo says.

'No?'

Mahlo smiles thinly. 'Current thinking in the C-suite is that Category Gamma is a confession of defeat. It's bad for morale. It cultivates defeatist attitudes. Aside from the special categories, Epsilon is considered the top of the hierarchy as of right now. All extant Gammas are going to be reevaluated and recategorised Epsilon by the end of next year. Other than that, what do you think?'

Hix says, 'You want a containment protocol? We've had this conversation a bunch of times before, correct?'

'Let's imagine this is the first time,' Mahlo says.

Hix stares darkly at his paper. 'We could exterminate all intelligent human life,' he says. 'If there are no sapient hosts in this universe, U-3125 can't incarnate.'

There's a faintly stunned pause. 'Yes,' Quinn says. 'You've pitched that approach before. And I don't think any of us here have ever been completely sure if you were serious.'

'I'm completely serious that we could do it and completely serious that it would work,' Hix says. 'The Organisation motto is "Freedom means no fear." If there are no humans, there is no fear. Job done.'

'But also no freedom,' Devlin says. He has a thin, reedy voice. 'The dead aren't free –'

'We're getting off topic,' Quinn says. 'We're not exterminating all sapient life.'

'We could immediately terminate and suppress all memetics and antimemetics research worldwide,' Hix says. 'Not just in the Organisation. We would have to systematically dismantle the whole scientific field, forever. Stop all the experiments, scrap all the research, brainwash all the researchers. If nobody actively researches this field, nobody will ever find

U-3125. It stays buried in the farthest reaches of ideatic space indefinitely, like radioactive waste.' He looks up at the ceiling. The problem is interesting. 'Ironically, the most practical way to do that would be to develop an artificial meme. One that encodes the idea that memetics research is intrinsically worthless and harmful. Enrich it with religious or pseudoscientific virals and release it to the general public. A year after it got out we'd be tearing our own labs down. Unless the Antimemetics Division's institutional immunity to that kind of external threat was strong enough to stand up to the pressure. Interesting scenario. Even if we don't go in that direction we should definitely think about war-gaming it in simulation, see what outcomes are likely –'

'Ed,' Quinn says.

'No, hiding wouldn't work. It could be introduced externally or occur naturally –'

'We know. Ed, that's already happened. U-3125 is incarnating as we speak. Look at these precursor anomalies. We're in what you called the "foreshadow." It's *here.*'

Quinn is referring to predictive models that Hix must have created himself during prior meetings, models with which he doesn't have time to familiarise himself. Still, he gets it.

He wishes he didn't get it. His fear comes from a completely different place from most people's. The sheer alien scale of the adversary is enough to intimidate most into submission. From a cursory read, U-3125 looks like a nightmare scenario; it's going to turn human civilisation into something beyond Hix's ability to imagine. But that's every Monday in this job, and in any case Hix doesn't have much of an imagination. He is intimately familiar with almost the entire Unknown database, and he is a world authority in anomalous containment. The few areas of science he doesn't have genius-level ability in, he has trusted colleagues who do. Those are all solved problems, locked boxes.

This is different. He has more ideas, but there is, mechanically, no way to start working on the problem. It would eviscerate him the moment he tried to comprehend the entire problem. He would need to design and build the box while already inside the box he was building. He would need to box the *universe.*

He looks around the room's walls. They seem to be holding up.

‘We could hide in units like this for the rest of our lives,’ he says. ‘Our whole species. While U-3125 roamed our reality unchecked, like a plague. Semantic inversion. I declare this to be the exterior of the containment unit. Done.’

No reaction.

‘I don’t think we can do it,’ he says. ‘If U-3125 is live in consensus nominality right now, the game is over. I don’t care if the Gamma category lives or dies, from where I’m sitting this Unknown is functionally uncontainable. I … my team and I may have said something different on prior iterations. I could be in the wrong headspace to see the answer. We are all of us different people from day to day.’

‘No,’ Mahlo says. ‘You say the same thing every time.’

‘So that’s it. Is that it?’

Mahlo says, ‘The Organisation was originally founded as a scientific research institution. And, although our responsibilities have expanded considerably in the centuries since then, I believe that, at our core, we are still a scientific research institution. In the majority of cases, this entails the establishment of formal containment protocols so that Unknowns can be kept safely, and indefinitely, and so that they can be studied. Standard guidance is against active neutralisation of Unknown phenomena and to avoid destruction at all costs. Everybody in this room is aware of this.

‘However. Senior Organisation officials such as me have the right to waive that guideline under certain narrow conditions. I am exercising that right. I deem that U-3125 cannot coexist with our world. We must destroy U-3125. Forever. Does that change your assessment?’

‘You want a neutralisation protocol,’ Hix deadpans. His expression is worsening by the minute.

Mahlo adds, ‘I know that neutralisation is … *generally* considered easier than mere containment.’

Hix says:

‘When I first joined the Organisation, I asked my mentor, who retired many years ago, “What’s the biggest Unknown we’ve ever contained?” That he was cleared for, I meant, of course. And he told me about a very old rumour he once heard, back in *his* earliest days, when he was just starting out. The rumour was that Abrahamic religions had not always been monotheistic. Originally, there were three capital-*G* Gods. And sometime in the past two hundred years, the Organisation had killed two of them.

‘I believed him. I was very young and inexperienced, and naïve, and kind of in awe. It wasn’t until years later that I thought back to the conversation – and the fact that I’d never heard that rumour, or anything like it, from anybody else – and realised he had been bullshitting me.

‘And now it’s decades later still, and modern memeplectic technology is a hundred times more advanced than it was back then, and I built thirty percent of it, and I look at what the Antimemetics Division handles on a quarterly basis, and I know better than anybody on the face of this Earth what is or is not possible, and …’

He trails off. They’re all waiting expectantly for him to say something. He can’t get there. He’s in the wrong frame of mind. Maybe he’s in denial, maybe the solution is an idea he doesn’t want to take on board. How ironic –

‘What did I say? Just tell me.’

‘Your team suggested that just because U-3125 is the most powerful memeplex ever observed doesn’t mean it’s the top of the hierarchy,’ Mahlo says. ‘You suggested that it would be possible to synthesise an idea an order of magnitude still more powerful than U-3125, specifically designed to neutralise it, and under our control. A countermeme.’

‘A bigger infinity. That would take … That could be … possible,’ Hix hazards. ‘It would be absurdly dangerous. It would require tremendous resources. And ten to twenty years of real-time work, completely uninterrupted. To avoid observation, we would need to be hermetically sealed away from the exterior universe for that entire time. We would need a lab as big as a Launch Arcology. Wait a second.’

His brain has just caught up. He realises the context in which he’s saying these things. And he’s been working for the Organisation for a *long* time.

‘It’s done,’ he says. ‘The lab, it’s been built. It was built decades ago, in secret, and we put our best researchers inside it and now the work is done. That’s what we’re meeting for, now. We’re ready to go. We’re figuring out how to deploy the countermeme. That’s brilliant! If I’m right, that’s brilliant. Am I right?’

‘Ed,’ Quinn says. ‘When you joined the Organisation, you were taught that a day would come when you would, with very little preparation, have to sacrifice much or all of your existence to protect what most needed protecting. You’ve worked here for thirty years. And all of that time you

knew that that sacrifice would be in your future someday. We were all taught the same thing.'

It feels to Hix as if a shadow falls over him. He looks at Jason Lo, his director, who hasn't spoken yet.

Lo says, 'You're right that the lab is built. Construction was completed in the last forty-eight hours. The construction crew have been amnesticised and dismissed. But the work hasn't begun yet. That's what today's about.'

Hix says, '… That's where my people are.'

'That's where your people are,' Lo says. 'They're in the bunker, waiting. We have your cover story prepped. We're faking your death. It's time. You're going under now.'

'Now? No. No, I doubt that.'

'Your team volunteered. I took care of them myself. They're good people,' Lo says.

'Like hell,' Hix says, 'did *I* volunteer for this. You plotted this. While I was in China. Right? God, I bet that's why you sent me to China in the first place. So you'd have space and time to plot.'

Quinn says, 'Edward!'

Hix says, 'No. Any prior version of me who agreed to this was a damned imbecile, and I disavow his opinions. This is a prison sentence. Verging on a life sentence. I refuse to spend twenty years not able to see the sky. I refuse to be entombed alive in work. I have …'

He trails off, and stares through the table, eyes defocused. He was about to say, 'I have family.'

But he doesn't.

He tries another tack. 'This … has a low probability of success. The time frames are bad. U-3125 will be here by the end of the next decade –'

'It has an excellent probability of success,' Devlin says.

'Define "excellent."'

'Better than fifteen percent. *If* it's you.' Devlin produces a thick report that presumably backs him up.

Hix peers at the document. He can see his own name on the cover. *Goddammit.* Fifteen percent is good. If he were anybody else in this room, he'd seize the chance with both hands.

Devlin goes on. '*You* convinced *us* that this had to be done. And that you had to be at the centre. You were prepared to make the sacrifice.' He opens the document to a page in the back. The eyeball of his germ roves the page

rapidly and finds the passage he wants. ‘Allow me to quote your own words to you: “U-3125 represents an omniversal-scale threat. It threatens alternate realisations of our cosmotype. It threatens microverses within our macroverse. It threatens universes that embed ours as fiction –”’

‘Go ahead and think of it as a prison sentence, if it helps,’ Mahlo interrupts. ‘Rescind your consent if you’d like. Go kicking and screaming. But the next place you’re going after this is the bunker.’

Hix glances around the room’s walls again. He makes it too obvious what he’s thinking.

‘The door’s locked, Dr Hix,’ Mahlo says. ‘You’re not exiting until we’re through here.’

‘What’s the cover story?’ Hix asks. ‘How were you planning to do it?’

‘An argon gas leak in STM-X02-370,’ Devlin explains. ‘The leak will be real. There’s a forged body in there already, a U-9133 special, impossible to distinguish from a real one. And we’ve tampered with your public schedule for the day. It puts you in that room, not this one. As for –’

‘He’s stalling,’ Mahlo says to Devlin and the others. ‘He doesn’t need to know any of this.’

‘Name somebody else,’ Lo suggests. ‘Being serious. Who in the world, other than you, stands a credible chance of solving this problem? Who could we send instead?’

Hix says nothing. There’s nobody. Really, nobody in the world. And he *can* do it.

Lo presses, ‘Is there anybody else? Even if they didn’t want to. Who has the skills we need, who isn’t already in the vault?’

The world shifts positions a little. Lo’s standing now. Quinn looks around alertly, gripping the arm of her chair. She has a fountain pen in her fist, uncapped. It’s like she just remembered something. Mahlo glances at Quinn, puzzled at her reaction to, apparently, nothing. Hix doesn’t notice anything.

‘It’s just me,’ Hix says.

‘It’s just you,’ Lo says. ‘That’s good enough for me.’

‘Hold on a second,’ Quinn says.

Lo pulls a gun out of nowhere. Hix’s germ’s enormous pupils shrink to violet pinpricks.

This is not part of any plan. Everybody in the room knows it. It’s a real gun. It’s impossible that he could have it. Quinn starts to rise out of her

chair. Her own sidearm is locked in a box outside.

Lo aims at Ed Hix's chest and fires twice. The first round pierces him in the lung. The second round, fired as Hix collapses, nicks his laptop screen, which is bulletproof, and ricochets up into the meeting room wall.

■

Lo turns, now aiming at Mahlo. He gets two more rounds off, each causing an ear-splitting electronic shriek and a flash of brilliant green light as Mahlo's protective ward absorbs the energy. Quinn lunges at Lo from behind his gun arm, deflecting it upward with one hand while plunging the fountain pen into his throat with the other. Lo struggles. Quinn pulls hard, opening his throat all the way up. Lo's fingers loosen and she spirits the gun away. Lo gurgles in agony and stumbles backward, clutching futilely at his wound. He smashes his head – the germ he's wearing on his head – against a glass meeting room door, and slides down it into a spreading red lake. Quinn shoots him, once, through his head and germ, making sure he's neutralised.

There are two seconds in which nothing happens.

Mahlo's eyes meet Quinn's. 'Your thoughts?' he asks.

'Jason Lo was compromised, I don't know how,' Quinn says. She makes the gun safe, holsters it, and vaults over the table to check on Hix. He's dead, she finds. Devlin is dead too. When in the hell did Devlin get hit? What just happened in this room? 'This whole base could be compromised from top to bottom.'

'Compromised when?' Mahlo asks. 'By whom? I thought U-3125 incinerated its victims. I thought it wasn't survivable. But Lo was still high-functioning.'

'We've miscalculated something,' Quinn says.

'Could there be a secondary form of the infection?' Mahlo speculates. 'If the U has a need for *conscious* exemplars –'

'They could represent an exploitable vulnerability,' Quinn says. 'Something we could isolate. If we could work out a way of doing it while blind.' She stands and backs away, running her hands through her hair, trying to focus. The whole plan is wreckage. They need to start over and she

doesn't know *where* to start *from.* 'We just … lost … Hix was crucial. He was our best option.'

Mahlo asks, 'Do we have alternate options?'

Quinn says nothing. She has inklings. She doesn't dare voice them, in case the act of speaking the ideas destroys them. What if someone else like Lo is listening to this, somehow? What if Mahlo himself becomes compromised? They got this far using discipline and structure, by containing their plan inside a sealed unit and destroying their own memories of it every time they left. That was working. But how can she execute any kind of plan without *trust*?

She looks desperately at Mahlo, and a lot of what she's thinking crosses the gap without words, through her expression alone.

Mahlo is calm. 'The Organisation no longer believes in unsolvable problems,' he says. 'Congratulations on your promotion to chief of Antimemetics. Tell me what you need.'

'I need time,' she says. 'To think.'

As she is thinking, she and Mahlo realise that there is a faint new sound in the room, a kind of electrical fizzing.

She turns around. It's coming from the airlock. There is a panel of controls beside it. The fizzing rapidly intensifies, culminating in a loud, sharp electrical discharge that causes the controls to go dark. After a few seconds, some kind of viscous, glossy liquid begins flowing out from the lower edge of the panel. It looks like machine oil. The fluid spreads across the floor.

And the inner airlock door begins to whirr open.

Quinn opens the panel. The machinery and wiring inside are an illegible mess. 'The hydraulics have been sabotaged. Lo must have smuggled tools in as well as the gun –'

'It's mechanically impossible for both airlock doors to open simultaneously, is that correct?' Mahlo asks.

'It was,' Quinn says. She hurries to the back of the room, where a medical kit is mounted on the wall. She throws most of the kit aside, keeping only a strangely shaped capsule with a thin nozzle and pink fluid inside.

'What happens if both doors open?'

'Unclear.'

'U-3125 is out there,' Mahlo says.

‘I know.’ Quinn applies the capsule to her right wrist and infuses the first half of the dose. It’s fast-acting chemical amnestic. She hopes that splitting one dose between the two of them will be enough.

The inner door finishes opening fully. A few hopeless seconds pass, and then, inevitably, the outer door begins to open too.

For Quinn, it is as if a suffocating wave rolls over her, pouring into the containment unit from outside. She feels seen, in the worst way. She feels caught in a hostile spotlight, pinned, guilty. In her body, she senses an angered vibration, a kind of wrathful engine ramping up in response.

Outside, Fletcher stands up from her terminal, puzzled. She has never seen the interior of the containment unit before. She calls out to Quinn and Mahlo, ‘What’s happening in there?’

‘Stay where you are,’ Quinn orders her.

‘I feel something,’ Mahlo says. ‘In my head. My germ, I should say.’

‘Me too. Roll up your sleeve. You also need to deactivate your shield for a second.’ He obliges, and Quinn gives him the rest of the drug. Quinn sorely wishes the shields were standard-issue, but they are exceptionally hard to come by, and there are serious controversies and side effects associated with them.

Fletcher is coming up the airlock steps. There’s something in her hand. A gun. Quinn’s. It was supposed to be locked away.

‘We have a major containment breach,’ Quinn tells her. ‘Don’t come in here. Return to your post.’

Fletcher isn’t listening. She says, ‘There’s a [redacted] in your mind.’

Quinn knew that U-3125 ruined minds. She didn’t know it could do it this fast. She says, ‘Ms Fletcher, I’m armed. If you step inside this unit, I am going to shoot you. I’m serious, get back. Last chance. *Fuck!*’

Fletcher raises her weapon. Quinn kills her. She falls backward. She bumps down the steps, most of the way to the bottom.

In the distance, a base-wide containment alarm starts up.

Quinn says to Mahlo, ‘We need to get you out of here. Then we need to sterilise the base.’

‘There’s a contingency warhead,’ Mahlo says. ‘Code name DRY ERASE.’ He clutches his head. His germ is twitching unhappily and changing colour and texture, as if an infection is spreading across its pale grey skin. Its cognition is not the same as a human’s; it is vulnerable to U-

3125, but it does not react to it in the same way. ‘I can feel it. It’s like – steel jaws. This is … most unpleasant.’

‘Who drives your limousine?’

‘Machine subintelligence. U-0150-C derivative. It can be overridden if you prefer.’

‘We need to get to the perimetre,’ Quinn says. ‘There’s nothing else that matters. We don’t need to remember why. Got it?’

Mahlo doesn’t have much field experience. The amnestic is blurring his thoughts. ‘I’m deferring to you,’ he says, dozily.

‘Get to the car. I’ll cover you. Go now.’

Mahlo goes. He stumbles a little as he reaches the bottom of the airlock steps. From the top of the steps, Quinn has a slightly elevated position, and is able to see clearly across most of the warehouse. There is no one around that she can see. She should be able to make it to the driver’s door unharmed. The limousine probably moves like a tank, but once it’s moving, it’ll move. The perimetre is about a two-kilometre drive from here. U-0150-C is bred to drive cautiously. It’ll try to stop at checkpoints and gates on the way out. She’ll have to override it.

She doesn’t know exactly how DRY ERASE works, or what kind of physical range it has. She doesn’t remember the last time this happened. She does know that each time DRY ERASE is used, the Organisation loses more information about how it works, and where the warheads are placed, and when and how to activate them.

It occurs to her, momentarily, that this is the only fact she still remembers about it.

There is a chaotic noise in the distance, discordant alarms faltering and merging into sounds of human panic and anger. She sees a part of the warehouse ceiling buckle, and start to cave in. And in the white sky outside, there are dark threads moving, dragging across the face of the site, converging.

■

Hix stares, sideways, at the airlock opening. He watches the legs of the spiders move past. As he watches, the first alarm cuts out and is replaced

with a second one, very different from the first, along with a repeating, pre-recorded announcement that is garbled and difficult to decipher.

Hix's skin flickers. His brain feels like steel wool. He makes the only sound he is able to make, a pained, near-ultrasonic trilling.

He was shot. Shot dead, right through the sternum. It wasn't quick and it wasn't clean; it took him five incoherent, ugly seconds to die and he doesn't have the words for what those five seconds felt like and there is nothing in his prior experience to compare them to. He was murdered. He remembers Lo's dull eyes behind the muzzle flash. And, dimly, as he fell back, Quinn, going for the disarm …

But it is slowly becoming clear to him that this happened elsewhere. To another body. The memory of the trauma is already leaving him, left behind in that other mind. He is decapodal, now. He has tetrachromatic vision, and specialised organs that can generate electric fields for sensing and stunning prey – two of them, one stack of electrocytes in each primary tentacle. He has strange new thought processes. He lived.

And he knows what he needs to do now. It could be impossible, but it's there, obvious and inescapable. He expressed dissent during the meeting, but the meeting has now concluded, and he has well-defined actions to take away. He is moving before he knows it, his tentacles autonomously making a good fraction of the decision for him.

He is small, with quick, slippery locomotion. He races across the deserted warehouse floor, evading piles of rubble and oil slicks of spilled *C. gigantes* viscera. He reaches a vertical access point, an isolated block where a freight elevator and an emergency stairwell lead down into the immense subterranean extents of the Stanmoor complex. He ignores the elevator and the stairs, and squeezes himself through a grille into a filthy, narrow ventilation shaft that will take him deeper, faster. Mahlo and Quinn are bound for the perimetre, he knows, and he could conceivably try to do the same, but he'd never make it and that's not where he needs to go. He stops at basement level 2. Room 370, Cryogenic Distillation, where the argon leak – he doesn't have fingers to cross – is still imminently scheduled to occur. He enters through a vent in the ceiling.

His body is there. His other body, the forgery. It is freshly minted, fully clothed, accurate to the freckle and the filling, prone, breathing slowly, and entirely vacant. Ready to die.

There is an Unknown, elsewhere in the Organisation, that can produce things like this. ‘Shallow clones.’ The procedure requires the Unknown to have ‘closely observed’ a subject in order to create the duplicate of them. Hix has never knowingly authorised the Organisation to let that U observe him, but that doesn’t mean anything. The procedure also requires an existing human corpse to serve as ‘raw material,’ a fact to which Hix, who has worked with the Organisation for an awful number of years, is entirely numb.

He slithers down the wall, loses his grip halfway – dusty suckers – and drops to the floor with a wet, fleshy thump. He scrambles out from behind a machine and latches onto the forgery’s head. He wraps his tendrils around its brain stem and eyes. His germ physiology forms the bond as a kind of reflex action. As if it was bred to want to do it. It’s the same reflex that caused him to release his old body when it died.

The forged brain, he finds, is cold. No thoughts, conscious or unconscious. It stirs. Slowly. Hix thinks, as hard as he can using his stolen germ brain: *Motor control.* He doesn’t need a full, working brain, not yet. His skin shifts texture and colour, in waves. It’s like trying to jump-start a car.

A finger twitches.

In one corner of the room, an atmospheric monitoring unit starts bleeping urgently. The leak has started. Or, at least, started to be measurable. There is some kind of faint background hiss in the room, there has been since Hix arrived, but in germ form Hix has relatively poor hearing. It is unclear which machine or canister in the room has failed. Argon is invisible and totally odourless and tasteless. Hix realises that the forged body has ‘collapsed’ a few metres short of a rack containing emergency gas masks. It also appears to be wearing high-end noise-cancelling headphones – Hix’s own, duplicated or just stolen. Hix twitches, vaguely insulted by the fake Hix’s implied disregard for critical safety regulations. That was supposed to be the story? He was ‘prevented from hearing the leak warning until it was too late’? Who would buy that? He survived *three decades* working with some of the most dangerous phenomena and artifacts in existence by playing fast and loose with the rules?

Argon is heavier than air. *Get your head up!* he screams into the cold brain. There is no way to tell how much of the bad air he’s already breathing. Argon is not a poison. There won’t be an allergic reaction,

coughing or watering eyes. It is the simplest, most peaceful death conceivable. That's part of what makes the substance so lethal to handle. If it feels like everything is fine, that's how you know you're dying.

The body's lips start to move. 'Get your head up,' they whisper. Germ Hix has one eye, and he's focusing on the gas mask on the hook. That's the goal. Get the mask on.

The secondary message is still repeating, in between wails of the secondary alarm; Hix almost doesn't hear the door open behind him. A man comes through. Torn high-visibility overalls wrapped around a filthy, stout blur, a man who might have been a technician, drooling blood from a jaw missing four lower teeth, brandishing a long, flat-head screwdriver. He hesitates for maybe one second, and looks at the body under Hix. He says, apparently to nobody, 'Two more eyes in here.' His voice is slurred.

Hix saw U-3125 before, pinned to a piece of paper, as mathematics. That abstract, that *possibility* pinned him to his chair with fear. But now he sees U-3125 in person, years before it was meant to be possible, and what he finds most baffling and frightening about it is how little passion there is in the blurred man's aspect. He moves forward like Hix is the fifth of eight radiators he needs to replace today. Like prying the forged body's eyes out with the screwdriver is just business, just quota. Colourless and furious.

The blurred man takes the prone body by the shoulder and rolls it over. He grasps Hix's slimy germ body and tries to pull it away, exposing the forgery's human eyes – it looks like he doesn't care about Hix's own eye, which is four times the size, with four pupils and a bright blue sclera. Hix slips through the blurred man's grasp and hangs on to the body's head. The man produces his screwdriver and plunges it into the fat part of one of Hix's tentacles, aiming for the eye socket beneath it. Hix emits an ultrasonic shriek of pain. Something connects. His body plan flips like a pancake. Four limbs. Two arms.

He brings a fist up into the blurred man's face. With the other he makes a grab for the screwdriver.

An awkward scuffle ensues. The blurred man is driven by a complex of inhumanly powerful thoughts and isn't able to fight in any kind of intelligible, directed way. But Hix has limited self-defence training, is several weight classes smaller, and has his consciousness split across two different nervous systems. He never gets a clear picture of what actually happens. He makes it up to one knee, and manages to take one deep breath

of clean air. A fist lands in his stomach and he stumbles backward and smashes his cranium into an unexpected piece of equipment, a gas valve. It's not the one that's leaking. He flails for support, trying to find footing or land a punch on his assailant, and misses, and the man grabs him, and fingers and thumbs close around his throat.

Hix cannot get the fingers away from his throat. He doesn't know how. He manages to get to his knees. In desperation, he disconnects from the forged body again, scuttles up the blurred man's arm, straps himself to his chest, and delivers an 850-volt electric shock directly across his heart.

The fingers clench for a split second. And then the blur falls away, stunned and trembling. Hix returns to his own head, as quickly as he can, before U-3125 can occupy it too.

The argon is up to around knee-level now, he guesses, wildly. The blurred man lies face down in it. He isn't dead, but he isn't going to get up. He'll take four or five more empty breaths, and then he'll die.

Hix staggers over to the gas masks, takes one, and spends several pointless seconds trying to figure out how to wear it and the germ at the same time. At last, he realises that he can just leave the argon leak behind. He's upright, and the door is right there. He discards the mask. But there is shouting in the distance, so he stops for a second and returns to the blurred man, and retrieves the screwdriver.

■

But what is it?

Where is it? What does U-3125 look like, truly, in its entirety? Its motivation, its origins, its modus operandi – how much of that *can* be known? Does it have to be known, to solve the problem? Does it matter how intelligent the intelligence is, once it's inside the box, once it's checkmated?

And what incandescent, mind-wrenching form could the countermeme take? How could human hands assemble something so devastatingly powerful and hold it steady; what human mind could wield it without exploding from the inside out? What would deploying that concept in anger do to human ideatic space? How far out from the solution is modern

memetic science – a year, a century? What deranged impossibility has Hix just committed himself to?

He doesn't know anything. Stanmoor is coming apart, and something violent and psychotic is flooding its corridors and its people, a livid roving swarm that makes every human into the worst possible thing a human can be. He descends a deep, seemingly bottomless stairwell. The elevators are out and the emergency lighting is starting to warp and flicker too. His germ is succumbing, slowly. It feels like his thoughts are corroding, rusting.

He can hear and process the looping audio warning now. There's a key word in the message: 'ERASURE.' Quinn and Mahlo must have escaped to safety, and discarded their own germs. He can only have minutes before they trigger the warhead.

He can make it. He can lock himself in. He's going to miss the sky. It hurts to think.

But he can think.

6

Tombstone

As Quinn travels north, he feels an unaccountable, unbelievable urge to turn himself in.

Because what he's trying to do is hopeless and stupid. But back there, *in* there, he was winning. He was on top, in there. He had a place; he had the rare and beautiful privilege of being one of Us, a privilege that he could still reclaim. It's a system that worked, and is still working. It's the only thing in the whole world that is still functioning and it's the only place in the world he could call 'home.' He's wasting his time out here. It's going to end badly. Marie is dead. Hix is dead. The longer he waits, the more it's going to hurt.

Back there, it was *stable* and *predictable* and he knew where he belonged. It's the future, and he can still be part of it.

He has a very bad dream in which he nearly does it. He reaches the mouth of an open doorway in the side of one of the sarcophagi, and stands there for a moment. He feels as if he is being pulled forward by his head, and he follows that compulsion into the steel corridor, and down the slope, and the slope increases, and he is sliding, and the shaft narrows around him as he tumbles, and he smashes into the sides, and he finds himself being wedged, and being crushed, and [redacted] he convulses in his sleep, and wakes up.

'Goodness me,' he mutters. He is soaked in sweat.

It takes him some time to start thinking clearly *about* what he is feeling, and to realise that sensation he is feeling is third-party. It's not how *he* feels. Something else is trying to take control of him, redirect his feet. This persistent worry that he is in the wrong place, which he can overrule if he focuses hard but never quite shut out, is how U-3125 manifests for him,

now. For almost every other person, this compulsion was like a tsunami, it overpowered them and drowned them and carried them away. For him, it's just barely ignorable. Not fatal, chronic.

Making this observation doesn't make it any easier.

'It's scared that I'll succeed,' he suggests, but he doesn't truly believe it. 'Everyone is one of Them eventually,' he tells himself, but that doesn't help either. He passes normal buildings, swimming pools and community centres. They register to him as ruins.

It becomes progressively more difficult to rationalise continuing the journey. He turns it into a habit, a bloody-minded fixation. He just needs to check this one thing. Make sure it's hopeless. *Then* he'll give up, and go home.

■

All memetic horror aside, Quinn thought UO Wyeleigh seemed like a pleasant enough place to work, at least aboveground. Decently spacious, if unattractive, offices; large windows, plenty of natural light, scenic forest views. A safe place.

UO Stanmoor is a hostile, sprawling industrial wasteland, four square kilometres of secure containment warehousing, research laboratories and administrative offices. Quinn is put in mind of a fossil fuel power plant. The buildings are grim, functional and aggressively unattractive. The ossuary is by far the biggest, dominating the skyline. There is no greenery. The ambient noise in the complex is a harsh roaring – it was built on a flat plain, and the wind races down concrete canyons and past sharp building edges.

Quinn is at his limit. He has travelled too far, and he has been travelling for too long. He cannot exist in U-3125's universe for much longer, sane. The sarcophagi are everywhere, and it is all still happening, and the fragile responsibility of being the only one alive who can do anything to stop it is like a steadily tightening vise around his skull. He is exhausted, and slowly losing his vision to bright migraines, and dismally lonely.

Between buildings 8 and 22E there is a vertical access point, a thirty-metre-wide hexagonal shaft with a yellow gantry crane across its mouth. The shaft was used for lowering construction machinery and materials into the base's extensive underground complex. The shaft is so wide and deep

that it has strange effects on the movement of air near its lip. It feels to Quinn as if it's trying to pull him down. There are metal stairs lining the inner wall of the shaft. He descends, and then follows his map into Stanmoor's underground complex. There are warning signs everywhere, many of whose symbols Quinn cannot immediately parse. Very soon, he begins to encounter heavy bulkheads sealed with electronic locks. He's still carrying the ray gun, but he's reluctant to use it on intact containment infrastructure, and he finds that he doesn't need to. Marie Quinn's security pass opens every door, every time.

Containment unit STM-V00-6183's airlock is identical to the one he encountered at Wyeleigh, just as the architectural diagrams suggested. The only difference is that this airlock is still visibly airtight – no holes. Quinn swipes his card through the reader with a shaking hand. The door cycles open, revealing a sterile white antechamber, stale-atmosphered after years of disuse. He stands in the middle, waiting for the second half of the cycle. His heart is pounding.

He asks himself the final, most worrying question, for the final time.

'But if you're here, Dr Hix, and you've built the machine, and the machine works: Why didn't you come out?'

He answers himself, as a kind of inoculation against the bad news he knows is coming:

'Because the machine doesn't work. Because you couldn't build it. Because you're dead.'

The inner door begins to cycle open. Then there is a metallic *clunk,* and it stops, and closes again. Beside the door, there is a set of controls. They begin to bleep, signalling some kind of problem.

Quinn regards the controls askance for a moment or two. He concedes that it is honestly fairly impressive that he made it this far without encountering an Organisation machine that was actually in any sort of disrepair. Looking closer, he notices text spilling up the screen, saying confusing technical things with time stamps and brackets and ID numbers. He is able to pick out some vaguely intelligible fragments, like DYNAMIC FLUORESCENCE OVERRIDE and 6 OF 6 NODES CHARGED and AWAITING MANUAL ACTIVATION.

This last piece of text stays there for several moments. It doesn't seem to be going anywhere, even if Quinn pushes buttons. So, he unslings the ray gun and takes aim at the inner door. Then, on a whim, he looks up. There is

a fluorescent light fitting in the ceiling, and it is hanging loose, and there is some kind of hacked-together piece of electronics attached to one side of it. With six strange glass bulbs attached to the circuit board, forming an irregular hexagon.

‘Oh.’

The electronics detonate. A blinding pulse of radiation strikes Quinn unconscious. Before he hits the floor, the inner door has begun to slide open once more, and the console has output one final line: DONE.

■

The vault was empty when Hix got there. His associates were missing. He was forced to presume them dead.

The space was gigantic. It was expansive enough, tall and brightly lit and airy and cool enough, that it almost felt like being outside. To his left, there was a rough semicircle of bluestones: monolithic autofactory units, each six or more metres tall, able to synthesise everything from cement blocks to silk to microprocessors. To his right, stacked, stretching away along the long, concave wall of the vault, were hundreds of shipping containers of raw materials. Hanging from the ceiling, patiently humming, were air-conditioning units the size of houses.

The space was gigantic, but empty. There was nothing he could do to fix that. He incinerated his germ first thing on arrival, as per procedure, and came to regret it.

He attacked the problem for over a year. Before the end of the first month, he had proven to his satisfaction that the countermeme he was searching for existed beyond the comprehension of human intellect. A human being’s mind would figuratively burst into flame upon contact with it; it was quite possible that their literal body would too, as a violent reaction to the profound, unalterable wrongness of every aspect of the universe around it. To create the countermeme, he would need to start from a human carrier of a suitable ‘single-celled’ base idea and amplify that idea artificially using a machine.

By the second year he had designed and built enough of the machine to know that the machine could not be built in reality. At least, not in the physical space available, with the raw materials available, in a realistic

number of decades, by a single individual. He tried compressing time. He tried duplicating himself. Both experiments proved to be highly misguided failures, and it was midway through the failure of the second experiment that he realised he had yet another problem, the most worrying of all: he was clearly losing his mind.

So he reset himself. He filled a notebook with notes, took a dose of D_{10} amnestic targeting the anterograde marker he'd set on arrival, and the next day was his second first day. It was a blow to the project's momentum, he lost state and flow, but it meant he was able to continue to work. Better yet, on reviewing his notes from a fresh perspective he was able to see exactly where he had become mired, and what assumptions he needed to change in order to keep going.

(Quinn drifts, as if carried, along what is not exactly a walkway. He feels as if he is floating in jelly. He mumbles, 'Edward Hix. I'm looking for …')

What he built, eventually, instead, was more of an anchor. He retained the essential architecture from his schematics, but much of the machinery was deliberately left inoperable. For show. The machine was designed to *look* like the machine, to put the observer in a suitably awed frame of mind, but not to physically function *as* it. To serve as a stepping stone from physical reality to the true machine, which would not exist except to the extent that ideas existed.

But Hix could prove that ideas existed. The experimental evidence was overwhelming.

By the time he was done, the 'machine' occupied most of the interior space of the vault. Elements of its design were borrowed from particle accelerators, nuclear reactors, radio telescopes … anything with a focus, anything with a recognisable core. There were hydraulic pistons and acoustic waveguides and coolant pipes thicker than he was tall. At the core, at the end of all the gantries and walkways, was a place like a stage, the 'junction,' encircled with medical equipment and computer terminals. And at the centre of the stage was a deep, oversized, luxurious armchair.

Any engineer of any discipline who looked upon the machine would see instantly that it was nonsense. But to an amateur, an Organisation draftee, dimly perceiving the machine's shape as he was dragged inevitably toward the armchair, it was, intuitively, the irreality amplifier. It had the correct nature. It would work.

(‘But why not use it?’ Quinn murmurs. ‘You could have opened the vault at any time. It’s here. It’s here, what were you waiting for?*’ From time to time, out of the corner of his eye, he sees what he swears are figures. Bodies. This should alarm him.)*

Once, while exploring human ideatic space, Hix saw himself. He created a rudimentary memetic descriptor of himself, refined it, focused, guessed a little, and there he was: a complex of brilliant lights in the shape of a man, amid a constellation of similar people, living and dead and real and fictional. It was fascinating, and sobering, to see himself in that grand context, from that elevated perspective. He was tiny. He waved. He waved back.

And when he saw himself, he came to understand what he was; what his role was. He was the mad technical genius, the crazed inventor who forged the final weapon. But he was not the one to wield it. The spark, the base idea he needed to amplify, was not in his head, and was not in the vault with him. Mathematically, it never could have been. That was not the shape of things. It had to be delivered by someone else.

(Sprawled in the chair, now, Quinn stares up into the constellation of machinery. Parts of it are starting to move, and to make realistic sounds, as if energy is spooling up. Someone is moving around him, someone who doesn’t seem to move very predictably, wearing a bizarre-looking headset that seems to be partially lodged in *his head. Quinn says, ‘… Delivered by who?’)*

Who, indeed.

Hold still.

(A needle slides into Quinn’s arm vein. And his brain explodes, like a diagram.)

■

There is a forest.

There is a nice big home in the forest, and a garden behind the home, a trimmed lawn encircled by tall conifers. There is a rough circle of chairs on the lawn, and a few dozen people seated or standing around or chatting in groups, with drinks and burgers, and there is a queue for the barbecue.

There is a tall column of smoke rising from the barbecue. It is an outstandingly beautiful day, and nothing terrible is happening at all.

Adam Quinn knows he is broken now, because he can't accept the scene. It's too sudden, and too pleasant, to be real. He feels normal, clean and healthy. He is holding a cold bottle of beer. He gasps and almost cries when he realises that the hand in which he's holding it is back to normal.

Someone says to him, 'Beats reality by a mile, doesn't it?'

Quinn turns. The speaker is a very youthful fifty, short and scrawny, with thick-lensed, thick-rimmed glasses and a flurry of wild, steadily retreating hair. He has a broad, fixed grin that, Quinn will soon notice, twitches occasionally, as if something is bouncing around inside the man's head.

The man offers his hand. 'Ed Hix. I work at the Organisation. Obviously. Containment architecture, biomemetics, a whole mess of odd jobs. You're Adam Quinn.'

Quinn fumbles with his beer for a second, then manages to shake Hix's hand. 'Hix,' he repeats. 'I was – er, looking for you.'

'You found me,' Hix says. 'Good job.'

'… Where is this?'

'This is where we met. Originally, I mean. Briefly. I barely remember you, no offence. We shared about ten words at the maximum. But I remember the barbecue, and I definitely remember *that* I met you at the barbecue. So, I thought it would be a more agreeable setting for the conversation we need to have.'

Quinn does not recognise the scene, either the location or any of the people. 'This is your memory?'

A few different responses seem to collide on Hix's tongue. He shrugs, elaborately. 'No. Yes. Essentially? I spend a lot of my time in places like this now. You see … You did see, on the way in? There aren't any trees out there. There isn't a sun. Do you know what that feels like?'

'Yes,' Quinn says.

'I used to reset myself every few months,' Hix says. 'But I started hitting contraindications for the amnestic treatment. The dose I was having to use was spiralling. And looking in the mirror on the morning after was becoming psychologically inadvisable. Ageing is one thing, it happens, it's a process. But when you wake up on that nth first morning and look in the mirror and see all of those years on your face at once, and then you compare the dates and do the *arithmetic* on the fraction of your life that just

went away in your sleep, it starts taking a dangerous amount of discipline not to just walk. The airlock is built to be impregnable from this side, obviously. But I could get through it if I really wanted to. I have the technology. And then I'd be out there in the world again, amnesiac, and everybody on the outside would be going crazy trying to figure out where the hell I'd been for all these years and what I'd been doing, and they'd find their way back here and connect the two dots, and you-know-what would happen. Well … maybe you don't know what would happen.'

'It's happened,' Quinn says, a little dizzied by the monologue.

'Not the way I'm describing. U-3125 has gone through a fundamental phase change. I'm talking about the way it used to operate back before it dropped the mask. Never mind. It doesn't matter.'

Quinn waits for a few seconds for Hix to continue his thought. Hix is staring past his shoulder, into space. He seems addled. His grin twitches.

Quinn says, 'Dr Hix –'

'And so the *wait,*' Hix says, interrupting, 'has … become a little …'

Quinn waits.

Hix suggests, '"Intolerable"?' His grin still isn't going anywhere. 'Yeah, that works. Come over here. We need to have the talk.'

Hix leads Quinn across the lawn and selects a pair of chairs in the Sun. He sits, and gestures for Quinn to sit across from him. Quinn does so, uneasily. Hix rests his elbows on his knees, and gathers his thoughts before he begins speaking.

'Adam, you don't have the idea I need. The seed for the countermeme. You're the wrong guy. You would know if you had it. It would be impossible not to know. You would feel electrified by it. Driven forward by the high ideal it represented, every waking moment. It's what *should* have brought you here. I don't know how you made it here without it.'

Quinn says, 'I didn't know I was supposed to bring an idea with me.'

'There's no way you could have known,' Hix tells him. 'Nobody exterior to the vault knew. I didn't figure it out myself until I was already locked in. Believe it or not, this is normal. We form these plans, and something unexpected happens, and the plans go out the window. And, under great pressure, we are forced to demonstrate creativity.'

Quinn takes a deep breath. He squares his shoulders. 'All right. Where is it? I hope it's in Great Britain. I don't want to have to go all the way back to Wyeleigh, but I will. If you can wait that long.'

Hix is shaking his head. ‘You can’t do it. Even if it was that simple, and there was just a *place* I could send you to collect it, like takeaway … you can’t carry an idea like this. You’ve never had that capability. You don’t believe. You’ve never had to. You’re the wrong guy.’

Quinn says, ‘I don’t think there’s anybody else.’

‘No.’

‘So where does that leave us?’

Hix turns, looking meaningfully toward the barbecue itself. Quinn follows his gaze. There is a woman tending it, with her back to them, chatting with the people in line for food. She seems to be the centre of attention.

‘Marie,’ Quinn says.

He stands up. He tries to go over to her, turn her around, see her face, but some dreamlike force prevents him from getting closer to her. People get in his way, push him back down into one seat or another. He can’t make progress.

Because he doesn’t remember.

‘She had it,’ Hix says, behind him. ‘Well, to speak accurately, there’s no singular *it.* It’s a massively diverse phase space of possibilities. Millions of people in the world had different ideas that could have worked. But she was one of them.’

‘Was,’ Quinn croaks.

‘Yeah,’ Hix says. ‘You don’t have to tell me. I know what you’ve seen. I saw it too. I know what happened.’

‘I need to talk to her.’ He can’t move. Why can’t he move? Marie is moving away from the barbecue, toward the house.

‘Adam, look at me.’

Quinn doesn’t dare look away, in case he loses track of her in the crowd. But he loses her anyway. He can’t see her past all the people. She’s gone, inside.

‘Adam,’ Hix says, taking his arm.

Quinn shoots a terrible, hopeless look at him. ‘I don’t remember her,’ he says. ‘I want to. But I can’t.’

‘I know. I’ve been examining your brain. There are layers and layers of damage there, and a lot of it looks deliberate. Some of it may even be self-inflicted. You have had memories suppressed, and restored, and falsified and erased again, and on top of that you’ve survived what should have been

fatal exposure to U-3125, *and* you've been through a great deal of completely non-anomalous trauma. You are breathing, Adam. But you are very, very ill.'

Quinn disentangles himself from Hix. He stumbles through the crowd toward the back door of the house. His house. Hix is there, too, somehow, in the doorway, blocking him. He can see all the way down through the hall, to where light is pouring in through the front door's window. Marie is standing down there, in silhouette, facing away from him. Checking her appearance in a mirror on the wall. About to pick up a bag and leave.

Quinn needs to move forward and he can't. It's Hix. It's not Hix. It's his head. Marie is the unreachable answer to an urgent question. She is on the tip of his tongue, maddeningly unattainable. He looks desperately into Hix's eyes, and sees a grin tainted with sorrow and sympathy. And a flicker of determination.

'Adam,' Hix says. 'You and I need the same thing.' And he holds something out. It is an autoinjector pen, a stubby white cylinder with a pointed cap concealing a needle. There is a bold black *Z* printed on the side of the cartridge. Quinn recognises it. In fact, he recognises it as his own. He realises that he has been carrying it with him for some time.

'I don't know what it is,' he says. 'I don't know why I kept it. She was holding it. When she died.'

'She was thinking a long way ahead,' Hix says. He says it with a note of professional admiration, and he says it more to himself than to Quinn.

Quinn, for his part, barely hears him. He asks, 'What does it do?'

Hix replies, 'Same as every mnestic. It brings back what was lost. For a price.'

Quinn takes it from him. There is a kind of singing in his ears. The sunlight in the garden is blurring, smearing out.

'Focus on her,' Hix says.

The background chatter of the barbecue drops away and becomes hard silence. Marie is gone from the hall. Adam moves forward, after her, into abstraction. Hix disconnects. Back in reality, he bites anxiously at a thumbnail, and makes preparations for the launch.

■

As he walks down the hall, Adam Quinn backtracks. Pictures on the wall frame events he no longer wishes to recall. There are long, long weeks of fearful migraine trudging. There is the agonising confrontation with Sunshine, underneath the Wyeleigh site. And then he is inside U-3125 again, actively engaged, complicit and gleeful and miserable and [redacted]

And before that, for a year, he is vacant. He is a suit wrapped around a ragged-edged hole. And then there is Marie, placidly tearing herself out of his life and him out of hers. And then it's hours earlier than that, the very worst moment, his awful sinking realisation that she no longer knows who he is.

And at last, at the end of the hall, it is two days earlier still. It is six thirty-five in the morning, November, predawn and freezing cold. Marie has stopped at her car door, about to leave for work but distracted by something important on her work phone, and Adam has followed her out to the porch, seeing her off. He has a work trip of his own, tonight and tomorrow night. This is the last time they'll see each other until –

This is the last time. This is it.

■

In reality, in the armchair, his limbs tense up. He curls into a fetal position, fists clenched, trying to force a word between gritted teeth. He almost dislodges the cable in his skull.

He is, in most respects, unconscious, but a formal medical term for his current state of mind doesn't exist. Little is understood about the Class Z drug. It is a Category ω Unknown in its own right and stupefyingly difficult to brew, and both production and experimentation were halted when it became clear how dangerous it was to throw that critical causal link, the link that turns real events and objects and experiences into memories, into reverse.

Hix is fully aware that the gambit is treacherous. But all the time is gone. Every less dangerous, less desperate chance is gone. 'Focus!' he hisses,

staring at his readouts. He knows Quinn can't hear him but he also knows that Quinn is focusing, as hard as he can.

Quinn breathes, 'Marie.' He grunts, and convulses, and there is a *crack* that makes Hix flinch, a crack like a part of Quinn's skull imploding. Quinn falls limp, curled up in the chair, bleeding from his ears and nose.

And she's there. She takes his hand, tenderly. With her other hand, she presses a few fingers to his throat, feeling for his pulse. He has one. That's the best that can be said. She looks over at Hix.

Hix exhales hard, a long, low whistle. The flood of relief is almost enough to knock him out. He's never seen the Class Z at work. He's only ever read the documentation. He clenches his fists. He says, 'Magic.'

Marie Quinn asks, 'How much time does he have?'

'Ah. Um. Minutes. If that. You know what Class Z does to a mind. It's going to be a close thing.' He has to raise his voice over the accelerating machine.

'I need to talk to him.'

'Right. Right.' Hix fumbles for the headset, and passes it over.

Marie has to sweep her hair aside to properly lock the headset into place. There is a heavy cable trailing out of it. The other end runs into her husband's head. 'Do I need to be sitting down?'

'Um. Actually, no.'

'Good. Don't stop the sequence … You've done fine work today, Edward. Thank you.'

'Acknowledged. Um,' Hix says. 'Take care up there.'

Marie gives him a curt nod.

■

She stops looking at her phone. She straightens up and puts it away. She turns around.

It's her, the whole of her. She is precisely the way he remembers her. She *is* the memory, iconic and brilliant. She smiles at him for a long, ridiculous moment. She is about to say something, but he is already going over to her, so she just lets him come, and they embrace, and they kiss, and it's a classic, it's perfect, it's everything either of them remembers. He loses himself in her, for what feels like – one second. No time at all.

Eventually, he breaks off. He presses his forehead against hers, heights as mismatched as ever, and looks down into her eyes.

She says, simply, 'Then you find me.'

'I find you,' he says. 'If, against all the odds, you lose your war against the universe, *I* find *you.* And I drag you back. And we make this work again. My God.' He is overjoyed and relieved and shocked and perhaps a little angry. 'This was the plan.'

'I had a hundred plans, Adam.'

He weighs the empty injector in his hand. 'But I was one of them.'

'You were one of them,' she admits. 'And I hated myself for doing it and the odds against it working were as terrible as any of the other plans and beyond a certain point of desperation I don't know if "plan" is still the word. And I wasn't planning to *die.* And you know, you *know,* I never wanted you to be part of this world. But if everything else failed I knew you wouldn't have a choice. You would be part of it. For the sake of that, I had to try.'

He looks into her eyes for a long moment. 'You didn't know it would work.'

'No.'

He asks her, 'Is it going to work?'

Marie turns away from him. She looks at herself, and at their fictional little scene, steadily brightening as the Sun rises. Portions of the scenery are flickering out in sections, sections of road and tree and skyline being switched out and replaced with pieces of Hix's amplifier. Or rather, the idea of the amplifier. Vast lenses and conduits, focused on her.

She looks 'up,' at the unimaginably gigantic memeplex that she has to destroy. Inside its maw, human existence, all humans and all the things humans have ever done, said, thought, or been, are rotting into sludge. U-3125 is, in large part, the lie that U-3125 is inevitable, and indestructible.

But it *is* a lie.

She feels it, now. She knows in her bones that she is *irreal;* an animate memory; an ideal, an abstract. When she returned to existence a few moments ago she was mostly realistic, but she can feel flaws and complexity being stripped away from her. She can see the shape of the idea complex Hix is assembling around her.

She says, 'Yes. I can see all the way to the end from here.'

‘That’s good,’ Adam says. ‘It’s been a long time since I had good news. I think … I’m having some difficulty thinking clearly.’ His knees start to buckle.

Marie guides him down. She holds his hand, as tightly as she can. ‘Hix is injecting you with antiserum right now,’ she says. ‘It’ll block the Class Z. It’ll prevent you from bringing anything else back.’

‘I see. Good. We wouldn’t want that.’

‘But it won’t stop the regression.’

‘Regression,’ he coughs. It feels more like excavation. The Class Z is gouging holes in his memory, unearthing and exposing experiences buried for years. He is seeing things, and the things he is being forced to see are hurting him. U-3125 has been hacking away at his and her lives for far longer than he knew. They’d lost so much by the end. He had no idea. It’s not just him, he realises. It’s everybody. He needs to multiply this feeling by billions. ‘You’ve got to end this thing,’ he says, the pain rising to a flashpoint. ‘It has to be today. No more.’ His eyes start to blur.

She says, ‘Adam, listen. It’s a different kind of existence up there. I’ve seen glimpses of it before, but I’ve never *been* there. I don’t know what it’s going to be like, but I know I won’t be a human anymore. I’m already not real. I won’t be able to come back.’

‘I don’t think,’ he says, ‘there’s going to be anyone to come back to.’

‘No.’

Adam asks, ‘What is it? The big idea.’

She shakes her head. ‘I can’t tell you. I wish I could. But I won’t know until I get there. And even then, the words don’t exist, and even if they existed, for me to speak them to you would blow you away. It’s too big for us.’

He leans on her, blindly, and says, ‘The seed, though. You can tell me that.’

She looks up at the sky. ‘People shouldn’t have to be afraid, Adam. Of anything. The universe is vast and terrifying and unthinkably dangerous and you deserve to be protected. To be kept safe and sound. Because otherwise those terrible things rule you and fear rules you and you can’t be who you really are. Freedom means no fear. It’s why the Organisation exists. It’s why I exist. That’s … a taste of it. The beginning of it.’

Adam is focusing, but still regressing. His life is unravelling in spirals. He feels like the drug is taking him to pieces. His eyes are dead but he can

still feel the fierce, radiant *heat* of what his wife is saying. It resonates with him. It's something he could fall in love with, all over again.

'Sounds good,' he says, pathetically.

The amplifier is complete.

Marie kisses Adam, long and lingering. 'We're out of time. I have to go. I love you.'

He says, 'It was good to see you. I love you.'

She steps back from him. She flexes what could be wings.

'You used to sing,' Adam says. 'All the time. It's the first thing it took away from us. But I remember.'

The launch window opens. There is a kind of *ignition.* And Marie Quinn's perspective shifts, and everything seems to shrink, and she is on the ascent.

■

She studied ideatic space, once. It was part of her training when she joined the Division. *'Here's what we know so far, Ms Sheridan …'* She learned about its topologies, its landscapes, its symmetries and cross-sections; its flows and novas and its baffling interactions with concrete space. Hix tutored her, erratically, but he wasn't her only teacher. The Division had far more people back then.

She studied it for a year and a half, but broke away when she realised just how much of her life the research was threatening to consume. The space of all possible thoughts, she found, was too huge and entrancing. It had infinite complexity and infinitely many degrees of freedom. It was, she sensed, possible to sink an entire lifetime into the mathematics alone and become utterly lost. There was so much abstract possibility that it was nearly impossible to get anything *done.* And there were real Unknowns to fight.

So she gathered the experience and tools that she needed to do real-world, practical antimemetics work. And then she switched to the leadership track, and delegated the abstractions to theoreticians like Hix and his team. People who were willing to go to infinity and come back to her with results she could do something with.

She has seen glimpses of this. She has taken away rough impressions of what it would be like to visit ideatic space. On screens and in simulations,

dramatic simplifications, two- and three-dimensional false-colour manifolds. Projections. Mere *maps*.

But she has never been here.

In ideatic space everything is possible and everything is real and every metaphor is apt. She sees a galaxy of shining points: people, all the people who have ever existed, packed almost densely enough to form a continuum, living and dead, real and fictional and borderline. Similar people, who think in similar ways and who stand for similar things, are closer together. Significant people, the famous and iconic, are brighter. There are stars for inanimate entities, too, and events and abstracts: countries, homes, works of art, births and first steps and words, shocks and dramas, archetypes, numbers and equations, long arcs of stories, grand mythologies, philosophies, politics, tropes. Every truth and lie is here. Ideatic space itself – the human conception of it, at least – is here too, a fixed point embedded inside itself. The idea of the Unknown Organisation is here. The idea of Adam Quinn is here. Marie, rising, waking, is here. And occupying the same space as the first brilliant spiral is a second, its counterpart, a galaxy whose points are relationships between the points of the first: *what each person means to each other person.* Loves, mutual and unrequited; admirations, aspirations, intimidations, fears and revulsions. Conceptions and misconceptions. There is Adam's shining link with Marie, and Marie's link back to Adam. And Marie's link to the Organisation. And at the core of the whole dazzling ecosystem is an ultimate singular point, to which every other point is connected: *humanity.*

And the whole thing, the entirety of human ideatic space, is being torn apart. U-3125 hangs above it, a monumental, blinding new presence, a singular entity more massive and luminous than both spirals combined. Its malevolent gravity drags humanity and all human ideas into its orbit, warping them beyond recognition. Beneath it, within its context, everything becomes corrupted into the worst version of itself. It takes joy and turns it into vindictive glee; it takes self-reliance and turns it into solipsistic psychosis; it turns love into smothering assault, pride into humiliation, families into traps, safety into paranoia, peace into discontent. It turns people into people who do not see people as people. And civilisations, ultimately, into abominations.

U-3125 is titanic in its structure, brain-breaking in its topology. It comes from another part of ideatic space, a place where ideas exist on a scale

entirely beyond those of humans. Its wrongness and its self-consistent evil are so profound that it hurts to comprehend. At first, looking directly at it causes harsh, stinging flashes in Marie's eyes.

But her perspective is still shifting, because she is still ascending. She rises out of the cloud of human ideas, gathering power from all of it, brightening, becoming *more.*

And as she ascends, ceasing to be physically human, she sees through the adversary, and comes to understand, instinctively, how it is structured, and how it is wrong, not merely in the sense of being foul and unwanted, but *incorrect.*

The part of U-3125 that was capable of communication has been annihilated. There is no longer anything to reason with. There is no quip. There is a song, but it's a song she sings for herself.

It turns to face her.

And when they meet, what happens is less a duel than it is mathematics, an equation settling at the end of a long, painful stretch of working, a blizzard of cancelled algebraic terms. In the presence of WILD LIGHT, vast tracts of U-3125, thought to meaningfully exist, prove not to. U-3125 is, in the new context that WILD LIGHT provides, an ancient irrelevance. Its outer layers expand, blasted apart by radiant pressure from the countermeme, and fade into obscurity. Its core retracts and collapses. It releases its grip on everything human. The mathematics is good. It happens in exactly the way Hix modelled it, back in the bunker, using the memetic equivalent of fluid dynamics equations, taking thousands of processor-years to simulate.

The core contracts to a livid red/green point, persists for an instant, and winks out.

The abstraction that was once Marie Quinn lingers, momentarily. But she cannot stay. Her presence, her song, would warp human space into something even more contorted and extreme. The twin spirals are already shrieking under the stress of it. Humanity is not adapted to withstand the presence of ideas so gigantic. Parts of it could survive, at the far end of probability, but not as humanity; not without being transformed into something incoherently alien. There is a place for ideas like her, but it can't be here.

She sets a course. Outbound, to the deepest limit of ideatic space.

Back in physical reality, quietly, the Sun flicks back to yellow. The world continues turning beneath it, and another dawn comes.

Epilogue

The interior of vault 3011A is, once again, a mild surprise for Mahlo. He always expects a space where a somewhat humanoid entity could plausibly live; at minimum, a bed. Instead he finds a dense warren of tall, dark wooden shelves. The shelves are filled with boxes of many sizes and the boxes are filled to bursting with paperwork, folders and cards. It seems to be a library archive room, the kind he remembers from espionage work in the 1970s. The stale taste of the air gives him an unexpected jab of nostalgia.

There is little space to move between the shelves, or see past them. But after some exploration, tucked in the far corner of the unit, he finds a little desk with a lamp with a sad yellow incandescent bulb and a folding metal chair. The chair is occupied.

There is no second chair for guests. So Mahlo leans against the nearest shelf, ill at ease. It takes him some time to gather his thoughts and begin to speak. He tells it like a story. He speaks in a measured, level tone. He is in no hurry.

‘And what do we discover?

‘We discover that there is time missing from our world. More than a year of recent history. And we discover that there are spaces, significant spaces, in every population centre, which cannot be perceived or entered. Our cities are rerouting around them, like mountains or radiation zones. And along with that time and that space, we discover that there are enough people missing, without any explanation whatsoever, that if I spent the rest of my life counting them, I could not count to that number.’

He pauses.

‘And outside of our fledgling Noöspherics Division,’ he says, ‘no one, not a single person, is even aware of these … thefts. Even those in the Division, who made these new discoveries, do not recall what happened

during that missing time. And no one can enter that missing space. The gap in reality, itself, can barely be perceived. It is this … shocking, blinding absence. This unknown Unknown.

'We have – cautiously – hypothesised that three to four years ago an unimaginable Unknown entered our reality. And then, sometime later, it left. Taking all of that space, and all of that time, and all of those people with it. We do not know what it was, or what it did. We have tried to find out, but the truth evades my best noösphericists. The question fights back, as if it doesn't want to be answered. And we do not know why the Unknown left, though my experts say that in the conceptual realm, there is evidence – traces – of what could have been a conflict. And in the distance, shining down on us, there is a great new star.'

He hesitates again.

'Even I don't remember what happened,' he continues, with his voice lowered. 'Which I, personally, find … deeply alarming. Because this is recent history. Like nearly everybody alive, I must have *been there.* In some respect, I must have gone through it.

'But if we have learned nothing else, we have learned this: Humans can walk away from, and forget, *anything.* Civilisation can go back to "normal" after *anything.*'

He contemplates the archive shelves in silence, for some time. He worries, briefly, that he really does know the truth, and that there is nothing anomalous preventing him from knowing it. That it's simple denial. But he won't say that aloud, even here.

He knows.

He says,

'And I am given to wonder: What was the Organisation's role in this? Were we witness to this anomaly? Did we resist it when it came? Were we the ones who defeated it? Did we negotiate? Participate?

'We are here, now. Intact. Like the rest of human civilisation, we are, somehow, *back.* To what do we owe that? Did we hide, or run?

'Do we deserve to be back? Have we that right? We failed in our stated objective. These people are gone, and it's useless to pretend that they aren't dead. We failed orders of magnitude harder than we've ever failed before. Despite which, we remain clandestine, and unknown to greater humanity. Which means that no one external to the Organisation can ever hold us accountable for our failure. If what Vopěnka said at the C-level meeting

yesterday is any indication, we will certainly never hold *ourselves* accountable.

'What happened to those people? *My* people. Where are they? No one is *just* dead, no one is merely, *passively* dead. Death is *caused.*'

U-0055 cannot answer him. He won't even meet his gaze. He never can.

Mahlo says, his voice rising, 'These things happen. And we say to ourselves, "Never again." And a hundred years pass. And they *happen. Again.*'

He says, 'Last time. The time before this one, the time *none* of us remember, the time for which there is *no* evidence of any kind, but that I now realise must exist. That time, when we told ourselves and each other, "We must do better," what did we do differently, from then on, and why didn't it work?'

He says, 'What do we need to be? *Where* do we need to be, and how far is that place from here? Can we see it from here?

'Or is this it?'

He does not know.

And after leaving the containment unit, he knows, he will not even remember the questions.

■

Direct observation is harmful to Cela's species. Her mother died when she was a juvenile, killed instantly when an Organisation researcher took a close-up flash photograph of her face. The Organisation thinks her whole species is extinct, wiped out by infertility and disease, as an indirect result of excessively close Organisation study.

But they are not extinct. Some of them adapted. They fled, across oceans and then inland. They grew thicker antimemetic armor.

Cela is a fully grown adult *Cryptomorpha gigantes,* a massive, vertically elongated quadruped, almost a kilometre tall at the shoulder. As Mahlo's motorcade leaves Black River, she is standing just beyond the site's perimetre, with a crumpled metaspider in her mouth. She is unable to perceive the motorcade or the site itself, any more than any human can perceive her. They only barely walk the same earth.

The spider is a 200-metre-long bundle of legs, eyes and chitin, long body parts dangling from each side of Cela's jaws. The spider convulses ineffectually. It can't escape. The spider population, once rampant, is under control once again. They were numerous, and tasty, but the Ones Who Walk Very Slowly have a broad diet.

Cela bites down, biting through the last of the spider's legs, which begin an achingly slow tumble to the ground, accompanied by a gout of bug juice. Cela tosses the spider's mauled thorax in the air and catches it in the back of her throat. She gulps it down, mostly whole, still twitching. She raises her head and vocalises triumphantly, a deafening, inaudible, infrasonic warble. The call carries all the way to her mate and children, on the horizon.

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